

Sociological liberalism in the context of Dennis Rodman's visits to North Korea

Introduction

As a lot of people know, Kim Jong-un, the current leader of Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) also known as North Korea, is a great fan of basketball. He has lived in Switzerland, Europe in his adolescent years where he most probably cultivated the love of the sport. His peers, during his studies there, have commented seeing him on the basketball court playing. At that time people would have not expected that North Korea's love for basketball would result in, which some would call, basketball diplomacy.

Kim Jong-un is particularly fond of the NBA team Chicago Bulls. During his stay in Switzerland his peers point out that he liked to wear a Chicago Bulls jersey and was a big fan of Michael Jordan. Therefore, years later when the young Kim had gotten the throne in North Korea he started to think about inviting Michael Jordan, together with some other star players during that era, to North Korea for a demonstrative friendly basketball game between and together with the North Korean athletes. Michael Jordan refused the offer, which meant that the news agency Vice, who were supposed to accompany the basketball stars to North Korea to document the event, had to find a new player who would be willing to go to perform for the young Kim.

Shortly after the refusal of Michael Jordan, another Chicago Bulls star was contacted- Dennis Rodman. He agreed to the trip to North Korea. His first trip to North Korea took place in early 2013 together with the Vice News crew as well as three Harlem Globetrotters players (Andrews-Dyer 2018). That was not the first and the last trip that Dennis Rodman did to North Korea. Although Dennis Rodman does not hold an official diplomatic position for the USA, many would argue that his trips to North Korea have yielded, to a certain extent, betterment in the relations between those two countries. Whether or not it has been the case, our purpose in the essay is to show how and what kind of influence this kind of sport diplomacy could have in promotion of mutual understanding between the people.

For that purpose we will use an international relations theory to analyze Dennis Rodman's trips to North Korea and see if and what kind of connections we can see and how it would be beneficial for further studies. For our analysis we have chosen sociological liberalism to represent the potential benefits of the particular case.

Dennis Rodman in North Korea

Kim Jong-un is a huge fan of basketball. That information is largely obtained through the interviews with a student, named Joao Micaelo, who claims to have been Kim Jong-un's classmate in Switzerland. Micaelo states that he often saw Kim playing basketball. He even had multiple basketball games on his PlayStation and he liked to wear Michael Jordan's jersey (McMahon 2015,

3). That can lead us to believe that Kim Jong-un, at least during his time in Switzerland, was a Chicago Bulls, particularly Michael Jordan's, fan.

After Kim Jong-un went back to North Korea he most probably maintained his love for the sport. In 2011, after the death of Kim Jong-un's father Kim Jong-il, young Kim was picked as the next leader for the country. Many then were expecting Kim Jong-un to be more open and liberal in governing the country, but people quickly realized that this would not be the case. Nonetheless, there was a change in the regime, particularly the fact that Kim Jong-un invited former USA basketball stars to play in North Korea alongside with local athletes. What's more, he attended the event in person and sat next to the foreign guests alongside his wife.

Dennis Rodman first visited North Korea in February 2013. They travelled to North Korea together with Harlem Globetrotters for a HBO series produced by VICE television. During the first trip Rodman sat side by side with the country's leader Kim Jong-un and enjoyed an exhibition game at Pyongyang. They seemed to have been chatting freely as they watched the USA and North Korea mixed teams play a game of basketball. (Kim 2017)

Dennis Rodman has visited North Korea at least five times: two times in 2013 (February and September); January 2014; June 2017 and in June 2018. During the first visit to North Korea in 2013 after the exhibition game Dennis Rodman declared in front of a crowd of people that Kim Jong-un has a friend for life. After the exhibition game during the first visit to North Korea Vice crew and the basketball players were rushed across Pyongyang to an unexpected meeting with Kim and other high ranking officials from North Korea's government. Rodman's first trip in 2013 came just two weeks after North Korea conducted the first nuclear test under the rule of Kim Jong-un (Kim 2017).

During Dennis Rodman's visit in September of 2013 (second visit to North Korea) he claimed to have met Kim Jong-un's daughter named Ju-ae and that he chatted with the chairman's wife Ri Sol-ju. He added that "Kim is a good dad and has a beautiful family". There were rumors in 2012 that Kim's wife Ri was pregnant but that was not officially confirmed. (McDevitt 2013)

Rodman's third trip to North Korea took place in January 2014. It took place just weeks after Kim Jong-un made a violent move to strengthen his own grip on power by executing his own uncle Jang Song Thae, who was a high ranking official and also the advisor of many foreign investment projects, for alleged treason. Rodman was asked if the execution would hinder his trip to North Korea, to which he replied that the trip will go as planned (News Desk 2 2014). The exhibition game, which was held in January 2014, was, as Dennis Rodman put it, a "birthday present" for Marshal Kim Jong-un (Kim 2017).

His fourth trip to North Korea happened on June 13th 2017. He said that the visit in 2017 was also sports related. He also stated that he is trying to do "something very positive". Hours after

Rodman's arrival to Pyongyang it was announced that Otto Warmbier, who was detained in North Korea because he allegedly tried to steal a propaganda poster in the hotel hallway, was released after 17 months. Rodman stated that the purpose of this 2017 trip was to "keep trying to bring sports into North Korea". (Rivers, Ripley and Berlinger 2017) According to these statements it can be seen that Rodman is rather focused on introducing high level entertaining basketball to North Korea and is not particularly focused on the political aspect of the visitations. However, these visits' diplomatic effects between the peoples of those two nations cannot be underestimated.

Rodman visits North Korea again in June 2018. He also travelled to Singapore for the Trump-Kim summit. He stated that "I'm just happy to be a part of it. Because I think I deserve it. I think that I brought awareness to a lot of things around the world. And I think North Korea has given a lot of people this opportunity to do this conference now and I hope it is a success." (Hains 2018) After this particular visit rumors started that Rodman might be a diplomatic agent working for the USA but these ideas vapourized quickly since Rodman has continuously stated that his aims are to bring basketball to North Korea and connect with the people.

Sociological liberalism

To understand better the implications of Dennis Rodman's visits to North Korea could hold for us, we should use an international relations theory in order to analyze these particular cases. For that purpose we will use sociological liberalism to look closely at these Rodman and Kim meetings. Firstly, it is important to define what sociological liberalism is. To do so we first have to understand liberalism. Liberal philosophy started during the 17th century with mainly the ideas of John Locke who saw great potential for human progress in the modern society and capitalist environment. He argued that modernity projects a new better life which is free of authoritarian government that in turn benefits the development of individual's material welfare. Liberals usually take a positive view of human nature. They think that individuals are self-interested and competitive to a certain extent but can also engage in collaborative and cooperative social action. (Jackson and Sorensen 2013, 100) These aforementioned characteristics illustrate the world view of liberals- it puts a significant importance on the individual's development inside society.

But we have to keep in mind that international relations do not only focus on the relations between governments of sovereign states. Sociological liberalism states that this view is too narrow and focused only on one-side of the developments and relations inside a particular society. International relations (IR) is not only about state-state relations but it is also about transnational relations, for example, relations between people, organizations as well as groups which belong to different countries. (Jackson and Sorensen 2013, 103)

Therefore, for sociological liberalists, the transnational relations are becoming increasingly important because they play a significant role in IR. James Rosenau defines transnationalism as:

“the processes whereby international relations conducted by governments have been supplemented by relations among private individuals, groups, and societies that can and do have important consequences for the course of events” (Rosenau 1980, 1).

Thus, we can see that transnationalism and sociological liberalism are intertwined. Sociological liberalism brings out the importance between the relations of peoples from different nations in mutual understanding and finding ways in international relations for betterment of diplomatic relations between two or more countries. It is important to keep in mind that governments are formed by people inside the nation, therefore we have to look at the connections between peoples, organizations and groups of different nations for better understanding the development between international diplomatic relations of various governments.

The connection between sociological liberalism and Dennis Rodman’s visits to North Korea

Dennis Rodman’s visits to North Korea have definitely had an impact on the diplomatic relations between peoples of the two nations to a certain effect. It is important to emphasize the word “peoples” not the word “governments”. In other words, the visits to North Korea by Dennis Rodman might have not had overwhelming importance between the USAs and North Korea’s governments in terms of the betterment of diplomatic relations but it certainly had an impact- North Korean people could sit and play sports in the presence of Americans who were not, as it is portrayed to North Koreans in the state propaganda, dangerous. Rather the experience for the both sides were quite the opposite. They managed to play basketball in a friendly environment and did so by also developing social understanding of the opposite culture.

This kind of interaction could have a significant importance down the line when two nations continue developing mutual understanding and the emphasis on diplomatic relations. From the perspective of sociological liberalism it is important to keep in mind that Dennis Rodman and his crew of multiple basketball players had the possibility, to a certain extent, to submerge in the local population of North Korea, which is usually very hard to do when travelling as a regular tourism group. These interactions, particularly through the sport of basketball, emphasize that people, no matter the relations between governments, can come together and have an impact on the not-so-willing-to-develop-political-relations governments.

Conclusion

Dennis Rodman has visited North Korea at least five times in the past. The main reason for the visits have been to introduce sports, particularly basketball, to the wider population of North Korea. The visits happened because Kim Jong-un is a fan of basketball and was willing to host basketball players from America to play together with North Korean athletes. Many argue that Dennis Rodman was merely used by the North Korean government, but taking a closer look at the visits that

Rodman did to North Korea it can be argued that they have had an impact on the relations between the peoples of two countries.

From a sociological liberalism point of view it can be said that Rodman's and his fellow basketball athletes' visits to North Korea at least developed the social interaction between the people. Kim Jong-un gave a chance for American citizens to enter their country and spend some time quite closely with the North Koreans which, down the line, could have an impact on the relations between the governments of these two nations. We cannot say for sure when, how and if these particular visits to North Korea will give rise to betterment of diplomatic ties between USA and North Korea, or any other country for that matter, but at least it can be seen that sports, in our case basketball, had the power to help connect, to a certain extent, two nations' peoples who have historically been very intolerant towards each other.

Diplomatic relations should not always merely start from a dialogue between two or more nations, but cultural exchange between the peoples could lead to a better understanding of where the government stands on certain issues, since initially people are the ones who make up the governments of countries. Therefore, we argue that although Dennis Rodman's visits to North Korea, in short term, might not bring any significant changes, but in the long run, this kind of sports diplomacy, as analyzed through the lens of sociological liberalism, may enhance relations between peoples.

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