

## Original Research

# Build a Culture of Peace, not a Culture of Winning, through Taekwondo Diplomacy

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## ABSTRACT

South and North Korea have utilized Taekwondo<sup>1</sup> demonstrations for soft diplomacy purposes for decades. Yet, there has been little discussion on the potential complications with using Taekwondo for diplomatic purposes. Despite their good intentions, the current Taekwondo governing bodies' proposals to hold competitions between their athletes ignores previous sport diplomacy theory, the organizations' successes, and hazards outlined in current sports diplomacy research. Moreover, there exists a possibility of increasing hostilities between the Korean peoples and possibly not influencing the target audience. This exploratory study discusses the complications currently existent in this strategy and offers a potential solution that focuses on Taekwondo's ultimate pedagogical goal: the building of peace. Sport diplomacy and peacebuilding both bring people together to create lasting relationships based on shared interests and values. The present study builds upon recent Taekwondo diplomacy research by suggesting Taekwondo actors adapt Galtung's (1973) conflict resolution theory (CRT) to avoid the pitfalls of sports diplomacy while building upon the successes of past Taekwondo cultural diplomacy efforts. CRT provides a framework in which Taekwondo can be practiced differently by South and North Korea with respect for the differences between their two peoples and cultures. It is suggested Taekwondo organizations adapt CRT from a practical peacebuilding concept to a theoretical framework for Taekwondo diplomacy to build upon their cultural diplomacy successes. As such, the present research intends to contribute to the broader debate on potential hazards that may harm inter-Korean relations.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background & Aim

No peace agreement has been signed between the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) since an armistice agreement was signed in 1953; as such, the two Koreas remain technically at war and deadly conflict between the two nations continues (Vergun, 2023). Despite denying involvement in numerous deadly incidents, the ROK, the United States, and other western governments have found evidence that the DPRK: bombed a ROK passenger jet in 1987, sent a submarine into ROK waters that eventually ran aground with over two dozen spies charged with assassinating the ROK president in 1996, sank the Cheonan ROK naval vessel in disputed waters in 2010, and shelled the ROK island Yeonpyeong in 2010 (British Broadcasting Company [BBC], 2013). Since coming into power in 2012, the present DPRK leader Kim Jong Un has heightened tensions even more with the "accelerated the development of a nuclear deterrent capability" (United States Institute of Peace [USIP], 2022). The US Department of Defense claims "U.S. forces and U.N. representatives are still in South Korea with the goal of preventing another war" (Vergun, 2023). There consequently exists a need to continue peacebuilding activities between the two Koreas. .

Despite espousing being a discipline for personal cultivation through practicing self-defense, Taekwondo,<sup>1</sup> the Korean martial art and now Olympic sport, possesses a short but convoluted history that has always focused on diplomacy and/or rapprochement efforts (Johnson, 2019). Taekwondo

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developed first in the ROK under several martial art leaders and then later evolved into a combat sport there. Beginning in the 1950s, the ROK utilized army demonstrators to initially promulgate Taekwondo internationally to show their country as strong in the wake of a devastating war. ROK brigadier general (two-star) General Choi, Hong Hi is credited with developing and promoting Taekwondo in the ROK army. Also, he coined the Taekwondo name, was the first president of the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) and introduced his martial art-focused Taekwondo to the DPRK in the 1980s (Johnson, 2019; Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021). Since his forced exile to Canada, the ROK government has strongly supported the development of Taekwondo into an Olympic sport. These two Taekwondos have different pedagogies (i.e., a martial art and a combat sport); as such, they are essentially two different physical activities with the same name (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). Yet, this has not hampered the ROK and DPRK from using Taekwondo demonstrations for national image promotion and peacebuilding through various demonstrations around the globe. In almost all cases of joint demonstrations between World Taekwondo (WT, formerly the World Taekwondo Federation or WTF) and the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF), WT athletes represent the ROK whereas those on ITF teams represent the DPRK.

Allport (1954) stated in his contact hypothesis, also known as his Intergroup Contact Theory, that interpersonal contact is highly effective at reducing prejudice in certain circumstances. Sports as a form of diplomacy provides excellent conditions for this type of contact. Khan (2016) succinctly outlines how sport diplomacy works: it encompasses “diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, [and] public diplomacy” and “can be viewed as a set of formal and informal actions of the State, its diplomatic missions, sports officials, athletes, and coaches to implement the goals and objectives of foreign policy through sports [and] sports competitions” (pp. 33-34). “Acknowledgment of non-state actors, such as sports organizations, athletes, and fans, is growing,” since they are “shaping international relations through actions and interactions” (Masood, 2023). This is possible, because “sport is a universal language” and “the values of sport competition, teamwork and fair play help build trust between countries and bring people together” (Masood, 2023, (p. 33). Here then sports provide the opportune contact between two conflicting groups: a set of widely recognized rules of behavior based on fairness (i.e., fair play) where no group has a clear advantage over the other. Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis is utilized in sports diplomacy, because athletes who represent each side of a conflict come together in a shared passion as equals, allowing them and spectators to look beyond prejudices, stereotypes, and past animosities. As such, “[s]port

diplomacy may transcend cultural differences and [again] bring people together” (Khan, 2016, p. 33). Sport in general, and martial arts specifically, may “diminish conflicts, confrontations and transform [them] into diplomacy;” furthermore, “dialogue and development [could] be an ideal stage for universalism, brotherhood, friendship and above all shared values of hospitality, progress, virtue, struggle and survival” (Khan, 2016, p. 33). To be consistent and effective, sports diplomacy requires a solid theoretical framework within which decisions are made (Murray, Pigman, 2014; Murray, 2012).

International sporting “events offer opportunities to foster trust, stress international obligations, and promote a shared respect for sports” (Jarvie, Leaver, 2008). Moreover, sports transcend cultural differences” (Khan, 2016, p. 33) an ideal on which Galtung (1973, 2004, 2007) based his conflict resolution theory (CRT). Galtung’s CRT is central to peacebuilding activities and was highly instrumental in the founding theories of Peace and Conflict Studies and Peace Education. According to the USIP and Galtung, peacebuilding should be based on empathy, non-violence, and equity (USIP, n.d.; Galtung, 2004). For Galtung (2004), “violence creates humans incapable of reconciliation and reunion, more fit for retaliation” (p. 78). Any resolution of any conflict, he felt, must prevent sowing the “seeds for future violence” (Galtung, 2007, p. 14).

Indeed, “[s]port raises mutual understanding and promotes peace in international relations,” since international competition facilitates “a way to identify other states and their people, and furthermore, to overcome prejudice” (Khan, 2016, p. 37). Taekwondo has been a tool of diplomacy and peace for decades (Johnson, 2018; Masood, 2023) as it “fosters direct interactions, nurturing understanding among individuals from diverse nations” (Masood, 2023). Consequently, sport diplomacy and peacebuilding are two sides of the same coin as they work toward identical goals: bringing people together to create lasting relationships based on shared interests and values. Choi’s Taekwondo as a martial art and the ROK’s Taekwondo as an Olympic sport both encompass all these ideals in their pedagogical philosophies (Johnson, 2020a; 2020b), making the two Taekwondo styles ideal for peacebuilding between the ROK and DPRK.

Despite decades of joint demonstrations and intermittent negotiations, WT and the ITF are still in the peacebuilding process (Johnson, 2020a; Lewis & Johnson, 2024). There have been numerous unsuccessful discussions between the ROK and DPRK Taekwondo’s governing bodies to unify the two styles of Taekwondo. Today, discussions are stalled, but seemingly still ongoing, due to the current

political climate between the two countries. The talks have shifted from holding joint demonstrations to organizing inter-organizational competitions (Johnson, 2020b); however, this new goal fails to build upon the ROK and DPRK's previous soft diplomatic successes. Notwithstanding their good intentions, the current proposals to hold competitions between their athletes ignores previous sport diplomacy theory, the organizations' successes, and warnings in current sports diplomacy research.

“[S]port diplomacy has a positive future as a key driver in globalization, integration, and international society,” but “a frank appraisal of its limitations, weaknesses and controversies is vital” (Murray, 2018, p. 206). The majority of Taekwondo diplomacy/peacebuilding research has viewed Taekwondo diplomacy as a panacea, but a darker side to sports diplomacy exists: “[s]port *is*..., like diplomacy...good and bad, public and secret, brilliant and awful, moral and amoral, all at the same time” (Murray, 2018, p. 205). Sport diplomacy actors, like Dennis Rodman who returned from a DPRK trip espousing the kindness of the Kim, Jung Un regime, may be ignorant of diplomatic practices and easily duped by the pageantry involved (Murray, 2018). Indeed, there is no indication that WT or ITF officials are trained in peacebuilding practices.

Other Taekwondo actors may be demonstrating a stronger understanding of “Taekwondo” diplomacy. One Taekwondo instructor and entrepreneur born in the ROK, but who immigrated to the US, brought two DPRK Taekwondo teams to the US for nation-wide tours in 2007 and 2011 (Johnson, 2018). Here, we can see potential for Taekwondo diplomacy to work at the grassroots level even by an untrained diplomat, since the instructor sought to create understanding between members of the decades-old Korean War conflict by bringing them together through a shared, beloved activity. While this instructor may have “dedicated his life to promoting taekwondo and peace between the ROK, DPRK, and the United States” (Johnson, 2018, p. 1642), altruism is not guaranteed at any level of Taekwondo diplomacy. This is especially true for the national international levels, since “states are only interested in sport for selfish, national interests. Period” (Murray, 2018, p. 207). Numerous unanswered questions arise when we look at Taekwondo diplomacy at these, the highest, levels through what Murray (2018) called the *dark side* of sports diplomacy.

By moving away from joint demonstrations and pinning their cultural and sport diplomacy hopes on inter-organizational competitions, the two Taekwondo governing bodies could be building a culture of winning (i.e., forced confrontation) as opposed to a culture of peace between the two nations. Switching the WT (i.e., ROK) and ITF (i.e.,

DPRK) relationship from one that symbolizes mutual respect and a shared cultural background to one of competition comes with risks that have yet to be explored in martial arts/Taekwondo academic literature (Khan, 2016). The aim of this paper is to outline those complications that may exist in this strategy and offer a potential solution that focuses on Taekwondo's goal: peacebuilding

As such, the present exploratory study hopes to advance Taekwondo diplomacy efforts theoretically by emphasizing peacebuilding as a theory (i.e., building a culture of peace) rather than the proposed sport diplomacy (i.e., building a culture of winning). The present research thus contributes to the broader debate on potential hazards that may harm inter-Korean relations. The intended audience is the actors who create Taekwondo diplomacy and academicians who study sports diplomacy, peacebuilding, and soft diplomacy efforts, especially those with interests in Asia.

## METHODOLOGY

Few researchers are investigating Taekwondo diplomacy's history and successes (Johnson & Vitale 2018; Masood, 2023). Some have written on the paradox of using Taekwondo—something that is inherently violent—for peacebuilding (Johnson, 2019). Most recently, Johnson (2020) discussed how to transcend complications surrounding WT/ITF competitions based on 1) Murray's (2012) research that showed competition can intensify grievances between nations, and 2) the ROK Taekwondo athletes' propensity to play unfairly in international competitions (Moenig, Cho, & Song, 2012). Johnson's (2020) study considered joint WT/ITF competitions potentially hazardous, but it found a possible solution that utilized Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and boxing rules for sparring and open-style tournaments for forms/pattern competitions. A cursory examination of the literature shows a limited number of researchers exploring Taekwondo diplomacy and peacebuilding. As such, there are limited perspectives in these fields. Also, most of the peer-reviewed articles in these areas are recent (i.e., in the last five years), indicating this is a burgeoning field of academic study. For that reason alone, there is more to be discussed on the dangers of inter-organizational Taekwondo competition. The present study intends to add to the growing research on Taekwondo diplomacy and peacebuilding.

A literature review was performed on Taekwondo diplomacy, Taekwondo philosophy, sports diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy to determine where these areas of study intersect. Keywords were entered into Google Scholar as well as the ROK academic databases RISS (Research Information Sharing Service) and KISS (Koreanstudies

Information Service System). The keywords searched were “World Taekwondo (WT),” “International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF),” “sports diplomacy,” “sports diplomacy problems,” “cultural diplomacy,” “North Korean Taekwondo,” and “Taekwondo demonstrations.” Academic articles, theses, dissertations, websites, and periodical articles were identified and used to ascertain potential complications with using inter-organizational Taekwondo matches for sports diplomacy. Exclusion criteria were set at academic articles published in international journals, master’s theses, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) dissertations, and academic textbooks. Due to the peer review process these articles and publications underwent, these sources were deemed most credible to the present study.

Using the Google search engine, secondary sources on sports diplomacy, and Taekwondo diplomacy articles were identified on WT and ITF Taekwondo, international news, and Olympic websites. These articles reported on the non-sporting events that can be identified as “Taekwondo diplomacy” as defined by Johnson and Vitale (2018). Internet articles that included commentary or were published by Taekwondo organizations were excluded to eliminate potential reporting bias. Furthermore, online courses offered by the USIP were consulted to ascertain present Peace Studies theories and activities.

Korean language academic articles, theses, and dissertations written typically include an English abstract, and several of these appeared in our searches. The author possesses a working knowledge of Korean; nevertheless, the Google Translate and an independent translator were used to ensure comprehension of Korean language sources. The above exclusion criteria were also applied to these sources.

A documentary analysis was then conducted, since this type of analysis is often performed when human subjects are lacking and documents are the only source of information (Shaw, Elston, & Abbott, 2004). No empirical data on Taekwondo diplomacy or peacebuilding was found during the literature review. Although the ROK regularly uses Taekwondo for peacebuilding with the DPRK (Johnson, 2019), there is no way to study the effectiveness of these endeavors with the DPRK populous as researchers cannot engage in research inside North Korea (Cynarski & Johnson, 2020). Documentary analysis may accordingly afford an “interpretative analysis...when implied assumptions or underlying ideologies are identified and discussed” (Shaw, Elston, Abbott, 2004, p. 259). The present study’s theoretical lens was peacebuilding; thus, documentary analysis permitted an accepted analysis of Taekwondo diplomacy documents that may not have been initially linked to peacebuilding.

Themes were identified and then codified through a peacebuilding theory lens. The themes identified were Korean sports diplomacy, Taekwondo diplomacy, and Korean cultural diplomacy. These themes were then analyzed and correlated to soft, and more specifically Taekwondo, diplomacy. These were then codified using the USIP’s definitions of conflict and peacebuilding. Consequently, data on events such as international competitions, sport (i.e., Taekwondo) psychology, and Taekwondo biomechanical studies were excluded as these were identified as sporting events as opposed to endeavors intended to further peace between two conflicting parties.

Two theories were applied to discern martial arts, combat sports, and combat systems activities, which are often misconstrued as identical physical pursuits. First, Cynarski’s General Theory of Fighting Arts traditionation lens allowed for general understanding of the innumerable ways of and reasons for martial arts practice (Cynarski, 2017). Cynarski’s (2017) theory conceptualizes and categorizes martial arts as “forms of psychophysical activity linked to a certain tradition of hand-to-hand fighting or using weapons, aimed at personal development and merging educational methods with improvement in the spiritual dimension” (Cynarski & Skowron, 2014, p. 53). Next, Johnson and Ha’s (2015) delineation of combat systems, martial arts, and combat sports based on those activities’ pedagogical aims facilitated an understanding of the two Taekwondos and how they are used by their governing bodies and the two Koreas to build peace. Combat systems, according to Johnson and Ha (2015), are used solely for self-protection. However, martial arts are for self-defense only and possess a philosophy, or Way (Kim & Bäck, 2020), for practitioners to use their martial knowledge to improve their lives or the lives of others (Johnson, 2019). Combat sports, such as MMA, Greco-Roman wrestling, fencing, and Olympic Taekwondo, are martial arts reimaged and practiced for the sake of sport, but they tend to lack clear a moral philosophy outside of fair play (Johnson & Ha 2015).

## RESULTS

### Contextualizing Peacebuilding

Precise definitions of peacebuilding concepts have yet to be agreed upon. To that end, the following terms must be defined. The USIP explicates conflict and peacebuilding terminology concisely. As a world leader in peacebuilding education and efforts, USIP definitions were adopted for this study.

According to the USIP (n.d.), conflict occurs when two or

more individuals or groups pursue mutually incompatible goals. Conflict is not inherently negative; rather, it can be the impetus for positive change when channeled correctly. It is also important to note that conflict has made different forms and occurs at various levels. Individuals, groups, nations, or even groups of nations can use intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, or international conflict to see potential for improvement.

For *violence*, a more nuanced concept, the USIP (n.d.) bases its definitions on Van Soest and Bryant's *Tri-Level Nature of Violence* (1995). Violence, however, has numerous definitions as it occurs in many ways, most of which are nonphysical in nature. *Individual violence*, for example, is what most individuals believe violence is in general: harm to a person or property. More complicated is *social violence*, which occurs when "oppressive social policies that obstruct the spontaneous unfolding of human potential (USIP, n.d.)." Moreover, *structural-cultural violence* is when harm to others through cultural or society norms is commonplace and normative. It is the mainstream denigration of different subcultures or cultures. Going beyond stereotypes, structural-cultural violence may not be seen as violent or harmful to the group being suppressed. Rather, the policies or bureaucracies are accepted as the "status quo" and are normalized over time (USIP, n.d.).

Furthermore, the USIP defines *peace* as when parties formerly involved in a conflict actively work toward a new relationship dedicated to mutual benefit. Peace, then, is an active and continual effort to build mutually beneficial relationships in which all parties are working to establish trust from top-down and bottom-up approaches. As such, all parties within a conflict must remain heard and integral to this process to establish peace. Here, we should understand peace as an active state of working toward establishing a new relationship between conflicting parties whose goals are based on respect, the building of trust, and mutually beneficial goals (USIP, n.d.).

*Peacekeeping*, on the other hand, are actions performed to maintain an established peace or to enforce an agreement to cease a conflict. It is paradoxical to say that force is at times required for peacebuilding to begin, but in large scale conflicts (i.e., war) force is sometimes crucial to establish safety for all involved. While peacekeeping does not address the underlying causes of a conflict, it may be necessary to create a framework to start the peacebuilding process (USIP, n.d.).

Finally, *peacebuilding* is performed before a conflict starts or after it ends. It is preventive rather than reactive to a conflict. USIP defines peacebuilding as "a transformation

toward more manageable, peaceful relationships and governance structures—the long-term process of addressing root causes and effects, reconciling differences, normalizing relations, and building institutions that can manage conflict without resort to violence" (USIP, n.d.). Peacebuilding addresses the underlying causes of a conflict to discontinue intergroup conflict, building upon mutually beneficial goals that maintaining a relationship and prevent it from deteriorating into violence. While other definitions exist and add nuances to the USIP's understanding of peacebuilding, they mostly focus on the process of recreating relationships for the betterment of all (USIP, n.d.).

### Taekwondo as a Peacebuilding Tool

ITF Taekwondo is a martial art focused on character building, while WT's Taekwondo is a combat sport (Johnson, 2019). When it is realized that the two Taekwondos have different fundamental techniques, sparring styles, and general training practices (Gillis, 2016; Johnson, 2019, 2020), it is evident they are identical in name only. This has, however, not impeded the cultural exchanges between ROK and DPRK Taekwondo teams for rapprochement purposes. These exchanges were possible since the two demonstration teams demonstrated side-by-side or one after another rather than directly together (Johnson & Vitale 2018; Johnson, 2019; Lewis & Johnson, 2024).

Na (2016) claims "Taekwondo promotes unity and understanding of various international organizations, practices sharing and volunteer work, contributes to peace and coexistence of human society, and enhances mutual understanding among nations," which sounds superfluous until the WT's humanitarian work (outlined below) is considered (Na, 2016, p. 2). Taekwondo can be "a practical philosophy that aims to restore humanity through harmony between body and mind, tradition and modernity, and our culture and foreign cultures" if practiced under an instructor with these ideals and learning objectives (Na, 2016, p. 12). Johnson (2019) supports and explains this ideal through his martial art pedagogy. Indeed, Taekwondo practitioners "may recognize that they are capable of having a unique orientation of life formed through Taekwondo practice if maieutic questioning is incorporated into their training regimes, and that constant practice can remind them that knowledge acquired from training is useful to their daily lives" (Mayen, Johnson, & Bosch, 2015, p. 24).

Nevertheless, the question remains of how it is possible to use a martial art turned combat sport for peace. Through the right instructor and guidance, students can learn to channel

their Taekwondo skills and knowledge into insights that guide them through their daily lives. It should be noted that this process is probably not inherent to Taekwondo/martial arts practice despite some instructors' best intentions. Instructors must emphasize the importance of using their martial skills for self-defense and creating a better world (Johnson, 2019). For WT athletes, this is possible through the adoption of Olympic values (i.e., Olympism). However, the literature review for the present study failed to identify an overt methodology for how Olympic Taekwondo may be used for peaceful purposes by WT.

While WT and other organizations related to Olympic Taekwondo promote the ideal of peace through sport, they have yet to provide a definitive method for doing so (Choue, 2023; Johnson, 2019). On the other hand, Choi required all ITF students to recite his Student Oath that starts with a promise to adhere to the Taekwondo tenets (courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit) (Choi, 1983). The last two lines of his oath are more explicit: "I shall be a champion of freedom and justice" and "I shall build a peaceful world" (Choi, 1983, p. 240). These lines encourage students to take their Taekwondo lessons beyond the physical. Indeed, they are to use them to improve their lives and those in their immediate and global societies, which other researchers have claimed to be the primary goals for Taekwondo practice (Johnson & Ha, 2015; Johnson, 2019; Kim & Bäck, 2020). Choi thusly provided ITF practitioners with a more discernable and direct methodology for using their Taekwondo abilities and knowledge to build peace.

Although no evidence of Choi aligning himself and his Taekwondo pedagogy with Peace Studies was found, concepts such as freedom, justice, and peace are all directly related to the USIP's concepts of peacebuilding (USIP, n.d.). Furthermore, Johnson and Lewis (2021) state "General Choi's educational peace philosophy seems to advocate *peace through strength*," which is a peace strategy that "assumes human beings are inherently violent and that the world is a competitive place" (p. 53; USIP, n.d.). It should also be noted that while Choi did not specify his definition of peace, he firmly believed Taekwondo should be used as for Korean rapprochement and a means to unify his divided Korea (Choi, n.d.; Johnson & Vitale, 2018).

### Taekwondo's Peacebuilding Endeavors

Taekwondo organizations have a long history of diplomatic work. To understand how Taekwondo's sport diplomacy efforts have assisted ROK and DPRK rapprochement efforts and thus how they have been utilized for peacebuilding work, these endeavors are presented in

chronological order with some historical context. ROK General Choi, Hong Hi was forced to leave his beloved military career but later served as ROK ambassador to Malaysia from 1962-1964 (Gillis, 2016). Although researchers have questioned General Choi's motives for leaving his home country, he claimed he was ostracized by the then-ROK President Park, Chung Hee for disagreeing with the dictatorial leader (Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021). He immigrated to Canada and dedicated his life to disseminating Taekwondo around the world (Choi, n.d., 2000; Gillis, 2016). Due to this split in Taekwondo leadership, WT's Taekwondo evolved into a combat sport in the ROK, while the ITF's Taekwondo continued its martial art path (Lewis & Johnson, 2024).

Nevertheless, Choi first introduced Taekwondo to the DPRK in 1980 (Gillis, 2016; Johnson & Vitale, 2018). In other words, he taught a means of self-defense that heavily encouraged practitioners to cultivate themselves into useful and productive members of society. While Choi was steadfast in his writings that Taekwondo should be free from government oversight and intervention (Choi, 2000), some researchers have found that he was politically motivated in that he wished Taekwondo to help unite the ROK and DPRK (Gillis, 2016; Johnson, 2019; 2020a; 2020b; Johnson & Lewis, 2020; 2021). This path nonetheless permitted Choi to begin introducing Taekwondo to countries with socialist and communist leaderships, such as the USSR and North Korea (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). In his later years, Choi believed Taekwondo could be a bridge to unite the ROK and DPRK (Choi, n.d.). Indeed, Taekwondo was listed as a possible type of inter-Korean social and cultural exchange in 2016 (ROK, 2016), but political tensions and the COVID pandemic have prevented such exchanges since at least 2020 (ROK, 2022).

Choi's peacebuilding goals can be considered threefold. First, at a grassroots level, he wished to spread knowledge of Korean culture and history among Taekwondo practitioners so that they were never eradicated as the Japanese attempted during the 1905-1945 occupation. He did this by naming his formal exercises known as *t'il* after famous Korean military figures, culturally significant concepts, important dates, and important people in Korean history. Understanding and being educated about other cultures is a critical step to creating understanding and mutual respect during a conflict (USIP, n.d.).

General Choi also disseminated his personal peacebuilding philosophies through Taekwondo. Choi's educational goals for his students were more than mere physical skills. One of his beliefs, the abovementioned last line of his Student Oath, states unambiguously his belief that Taekwondo

could build peace. The ITF Student Oath “represents the way to apply the values of Taekwon-Do in everyday life” and “improve every aspect of” a Taekwondo student’s life by providing “the necessary tools to take decisions based on moral principles” (Toure, 2019, p. 19; see also Johnson, 2019). With this, the Oath provides an immediate pedagogical goal for using strength to build peace (Johnson & Lewis, 2021). While Choi’s peacebuilding goal is explicit, his path (or pedagogy) remains blurred, since students may interpret how to build peace whichever way their station permits or in whatever way is meaningful to them. Taekwondo was and continues to be intended to build people of high moral character and to serve a greater good; practitioners are expected to use their strength to protect the weak and build a better world for themselves and others (Choi, n.d.; Johnson, 2019).

Third, Choi tried at an international level to bolster the image of Korea by sending out ROK army demonstration teams around the world. These teams performed amazing physical feats (Gillis, 2016), which left little doubt as to the strength of the Korean people even after the devastating Korean War (Johnson, 2019). Of course, Choi also benefited from these tours by using them to introduce Taekwondo to these nations and thereby building his ITF. As above, respect is required between any two parties involved in a conflict. By demonstrating the personal strength of South Korean citizens performing impressive physical feats, Choi garnished international admiration for his people. By simple extrapolation, peoples from around the world could see South Koreans as more than just an impoverished people through ROK citizens performing self-defense techniques (Johnson, 2019). They could moreover see the necessary strength needed to recover and become a strong, democratic, and free ally.

After Choi’s passing in 2002, his ITF fractured into several organizations, all of which claimed to be legitimate heirs of his legacy (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). One of these organizations is headquartered in Vienna, Austria but is operated and funded by DPRK citizens. It is this ITF with which the ROK engages its Taekwondo soft diplomacy activities. Choi’s counterpart in the ROK was Kim, Un-Yong, a former ROK Central Intelligence Agency agent (Gillis, 2016). Initially, Kim spearheaded the three Taekwondo organizations in that country (Gillis, 2016), effectively establishing Taekwondo as a pseudo government-supported endeavor that aimed to use a sportified version of Taekwondo to further its international image (Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021). The meteoric rise of Taekwondo from 1956, when General Choi coined the name for the new Korean martial art, to 2000, when Taekwondo became an official Olympic event at the

Sydney Olympic Games, is unprecedented in the sporting world.

The Olympic sport of Taekwondo, a rival to Choi’s martial art orientated Taekwondo (Johnson, 2020; Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021), is sometimes referred to as Kukki Taekwondo in Taekwondo literature (see Moenig, Cho, & Song, 2012; Johnson & Lewis, 2020). The *Kukki* moniker means *national* in Korean and is derived from the Kukkiwon (“Institute of the National Sport”) organization in the ROK. The Kukkiwon is the educational and testing center for Olympic Taekwondo, whereas WT is the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) International Federation (IF) for the Olympic sport of Taekwondo (Johnson, 2020). The ROK uses Olympic Taekwondo for multiple soft diplomacy and peacebuilding activities (Johnson, 2020). Nevertheless, WT is the Taekwondo organization that the ROK uses to engage the DPRK in Taekwondo sports and cultural diplomacy (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). The ROK/WT focuses on maintaining Taekwondo as a sport whilst the DPRK/ITF continues Choi’s dream of using Taekwondo as a means of self-defense and self-cultivation (i.e., a martial art). However, this may be an oversimplification since the DPRK’s ITF continues to evolve with modern sports protocols and trends (see Lloyd, 2023) and WT calls Taekwondo a martial art (Choue, 2023).

In a 2023 open letter commemorating the organization’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, WT President Choue, Chungwon outlined his peace initiatives and accomplishments. All of WT’s initiatives, organizations, and programs are in line with IOC goals, and Choue (2023) stated bluntly that this Taekwondo organization’s primary mission “is to maintain its Olympic status.” On the other hand, the DPRK ITF’s motivations for engaging in Taekwondo diplomacy are unclear. Although headquartered in Vienna, Austria, the ITF is staffed by DPRK citizens (Johnson, 2020a). There can be little doubt that the often impoverished, socialist DPRK would invest significant time and resources into activities that would not assist the state in some way. On the surface, the DPRK’s ITF seems to follow General Choi’s martial art philosophy of building peace. Yet, we can only speculate to the true reasons why the DPRK chooses to engage in Taekwondo diplomacy of any sort, because “dictatorial politicians have interest whatsoever in the notion of sports diplomacy as a tool to overcome international estrangement” (Murray, 2018, p. 209).

The ROK-supported WT has taken a very different peacebuilding path. Since 2008, it began dispatching Kukki Taekwondo instructors around the world in its Taekwondo Peace Corps. Now known as the World Taekwondo Peace

Corps Foundation, it has to date sent more than “2,500 volunteers to 123 countries” (Choue, 2023). It offers assistance and cultural exchanges through Taekwondo education programs designed to improve intercultural understanding (Yu et al., 2016). Soon, it will expand even further to become the Sport Peace Corps, which will promote several Olympic sports aimed at “developing nations and vulnerable populations...in cooperation with the United Nations and the IOC” (Choue, 2023).

WT also launched the Taekwondo Humanitarian Foundation (THF) in 2016. Choue, who is also the THF president, introduced “the THF at the U.N. headquarters in New York on Sept. 21, 2015, the U.N. International Day of Peace” (Choue, 2023). This sister organization to the WT “supports refugees and displaced persons worldwide by training them in the sport and martial art of taekwondo” and is now running Taekwondo camps in seven nations, including Jordan, Rwanda, Turkey, France, the Kingdom of Eswatini, and Mexico (Choue, 2023).

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## DISCUSSION

As the results indicate, Taekwondo has been used for multiple peacebuilding activities from the grassroots through the international levels. First envisioned by Choi as a vehicle for personal and societal improvement, WT’s Choue has grown Taekwondo peacebuilding activities to great heights. Although WT’s work benefits those who practice Kukki Taekwondo, even Choue himself stated that these activities are designed to maintain Taekwondo’s status as an Olympic event (Choue, 2023). Thus, while WT is promoting a better world through sport on a global scale, a concept Khan (2016) also advocates, its efforts are not altogether altruistic. More critically, there are pitfalls in the current goals in sport diplomacy utilizing Taekwondo, what Johnson and Vitale (2018) called Taekwondo diplomacy, that may have unintended grave repercussions.

### Taekwondo Diplomacy and Potential Hazards

George Orwell famously stated that sport is “war minus the

shooting” (Orwell, 1970, p. 63), and this is readily apparent in the combat sport of Taekwondo. While researchers have addressed the paradox of Taekwondo organizations using the sport/martial art for peacebuilding almost ad nauseam (Gillis, 2016; Johnson, 2017; 2019; 2020a; 2020b; Johnson & Lewis, 2018; 2021; Kim & Bäck, 2020; Na, 2016), they have avoided one prickly issue about sports diplomacy: its potential for harming inter-Korean relations. Sport diplomacy has been highly effective, but its downside has yet to be discussed within Taekwondo literature. The example of Nazi Germany’s use of the 1936 Olympics to advance its horrendous Aryan philosophy exemplifies perfectly how sport can deliver an abhorrent and erroneous concept. Other complications exist within sport diplomacy as well. For instance, sports competition may “cause unevenness of international relations, foster negative image of international understanding, and are used as the means of enhancing colonization” (Chung & Baek, 2009, p. 210).

More specifically, our literature review revealed three potential hazards to Taekwondo diplomacy efforts if competition between WT and ITF teams occurs. The first hazard entails the finances of sport. Wealthier countries can invest in the best training, equipment, and scientific advances to extrapolate the best from their athletes in ways that lesser developed nations cannot. The winningest athletes from those countries can be interpreted as another example that their nation’s financial ‘might makes right,’ and affluent nations can thereby further their political and financial dominance over less developed states. Although DPRK athletes certainly fare well in international competitions, their ROK counterparts typically do better across the sporting spectrum. ITF athletes representing the DPRK may have an economic disadvantage when preparing for inter-organization competitions. This unfair advantage possessed by ROK athletes, whether real or perceived, may cause strife between the two countries if WT athletes tend to win more (or vice versa). As such, inter-organizational competitions intended to spread goodwill and further a peaceful relationship between the ROK and DPRK may ultimately harm rapprochement efforts.

Secondly, researchers have long found that sport competitions have enhanced conflict (Kapusinski, 1992; Norman, 2009; Kartakoullis & Loizou, 2009; Jackson, 2013). Orwell (1945) predicted this when he wrote sport “is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence.” While somewhat hyperbolic, Orwell may have foretold an undesirable outcome in inter-Korean sporting diplomatic efforts in which millions of lives may be at risk. Supporting Orwell are Cuesta and Bohorquez (2011) who claim game-specific issues may result in a culture of violence in football



(soccer). Murray (2018) underscores sport this by stating sport is inseparably linked to violence; he singles out combat sports like MMA by stating they “are extraordinarily and intentionally bloody and vicious” (p. 233). While Olympic Taekwondo sparring tends not to be as gruesome thanks to numerous rules intended to protect athletes (Moenig, Cho, & Song, 2012), it is violent. This is particularly alarming for Taekwondo diplomacy efforts since Taekwondo sparring competition, the most common type of Taekwondo competition, requires contestants to punch and kick each other for points. The attempt to guide ROK (and presumably DPRK) spectators’ hearts and minds toward reconciliation and rapprochement may backfire when contestants from either side of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (popularly known as the DMZ) compete in a manner that is inherently aggressive. As above, it can be difficult for an individual, athlete or spectator, unversed in martial arts philosophy and pedagogy to see this as ‘peaceful.’ Indeed, Galtung (2004) states people

can build their lives around their hatred. But this will never be a really rich and creative life. Every day we can hear, at the micro- and meso-levels, stories of violence from people forever marked by conflict and violence. They have become *offended*, and have built their lives around the injustice they feel they have suffered. (p. 78).

The frequent skirmishes between the ROK and DPRK along their border, the common firing of their naval vessels at each other, the occasional bombing of an island, the sinking of the ROK Cheonan naval ship, and the ever-present threat of nuclear attacks on the South are just a few violent aspects Korean citizens live with. Due to a lack of reporting from the DPRK, it is near impossible to tell what aggressions, if any, have been perpetrated by the South. Still, the DPRK’s state-run media promotes fear and loathing of the ROK and its other enemies. Thus, it would be all too easy for a ROK or DPRK Taekwondo audience to slip from considering an opponent from the other Korea as a friendly competitor to a hated enemy.

The third hazard that may not be readily apparent outside of diplomatic circles is that fans may not wish their sports to be used as tools of diplomacy (Murray, 2018). Sport purists, and especially those who identify a significant part of their personality with a sport or sports teams, may see sports diplomatic efforts as “a sham, a photo-op, or a political gimmick” and the politicians who do so as hijackers (Murray, 2012, p. 577). At stake for these fans is the integrity of the sport, the value of competition, and/or what the sport itself represents to them. To them, the playing of the sport for any other purpose other than enjoyment is

almost heresy (Murray, 2018). The WT and ITF Taekwondos are often taught as a Way of life (Kim & Bäck, 2020), and their practitioners could be considered sports purists even if they do not follow or participate in Taekwondo competitions. WT and ITF Taekwondo practitioners, many of whom have spent decades learning and practicing their sport and/or art, may view WT/ITF competitions as forced and as a cheapening of their years of devotion to a Taekwondo life.

Moreover, there is little empirical evidence that sports diplomacy like what WT and the ITF wish to engage in actually shapes the minds of spectators. Blomqvist and Hansson (2021) state combat “sports fans have not actively engaged in the competition and therefore may not be as eligible for reconciliation” when these events are used for diplomatic purposes (p. 53). They claim the athletes may be more inclined to be influenced by these events, since they “might share a psychological connection [to the Other] due to the actual competition” (Blomqvist and Hansson, 2021, p. 53). This research suggests that inter-organizational competitions such as those proposed between WT and ITF players would most likely only benefit the players themselves rather than promote peace among the peoples of the organizations’ respective countries. If one goal for Taekwondo diplomacy is to affect a positive change in the minds and hearts of Korean citizens and those of the concerned people around the world toward Korean rapprochement, then the target audience of inter-organization Taekwondo competitions would likely be missed through WT/ITF inter-organizational competitions (Johnson, 2019).

### **Taekwondo Diplomacy, Korean Culture, and Peacebuilding**

Korean culture has a long history of game playing and competition. However, this can create a culture in which winning is valued more than a culture of peace within the modern Taekwondo diplomacy context. President Choue’s slogan “Peace is more precious than triumph” (Johnson & Lewis, 2021, p. 20) indicates that Taekwondo organizations may be aware of this, but the proposal to have inter-organizational competitions comes with concerns. Furthermore, a mainstay policy within ROK unification policies is cultural diplomacy with Taekwondo playing a central role (Johnson, 2020). Taekwondo diplomacy thusly projects the perception that the two Koreas are willing to work together. One evolution of the joint Taekwondo demonstrations shows this may already be happening. The first WT/ITF demonstrations in 2018 in the ROK had little to no planned interactions between the two teams. As more

and more demonstrations occurred, sometimes the WT team captain would hold boards for his ITF counterpart to break, which further underpinned the fact that ROK and DPRK citizens can help each other. These simple yet profound moments of sharing the demonstration stage and helping each other perform their Way of life (Kim & Bäck, 2020) could not be more symbolic for a peaceful future on the Korean Peninsula. It also interactively provides the “adaptive and iterative” peacebuilding process needed in Taekwondo diplomacy (Johnson, 2020, p. 1999).

WT/ITF Taekwondo competitions seem to be willfully ignoring this by forcing a winner/loser situation in which their player athletes, or pseudo-ambassadors, attempt to defeat each other through simulated combat. Current combat sports research indicates that inter-competitions may miss their intended peacebuilding mark (Blomqvist & Hansson, 2021). If WT and ITF athletes square off in competition, a slippery slope could be created. Taekwondo diplomacy might be transformed from cultural diplomacy, which has been successful for decades (Johnson, 2019), to a form of sports diplomacy, which presents the aforementioned hazards.

Building peace, it is worth repeating, is the purpose of Taekwondo diplomacy. To do that, all sides of a conflict must come together without a goal of winning or defeating the Other. Inter-organizational competitions might transform the current culture of peace between the WT and ITF into a culture of winners and losers. A culture of winning is the antithesis of peacebuilding. All parties engaged in a conflict must work together to build a new relationship based on establishing and maintaining peace together, not one in which one side is superior to the other (Galtung 2004; 2007). If there is a risk of harming or even a slight possibility of reversing all of the good work the IOC, WT, the ITF, and their athletes and administrators have accomplished, why push for competition? Why not create innovative ways to build upon the existing relationship and the peaceful practices that seem to work? Why not, indeed.

## CONCLUSION

Taekwondo diplomacy has gone through numerous changes over the decades, and a recent proposal wishes for it to evolve from an act of cultural diplomacy to that of sports diplomacy. Maybe that is due to the IOC, ROK and DPRK political goals, or just the Korean desire to compete. The results of this exploratory study did not uncover why the DPRK’s ITF engages in Taekwondo diplomacy, but reveal WT engages in Taekwondo peacebuilding desires to maintain its Olympic status. The present study also suggests that WT and the ITF have yet to implement a peacebuilding

theoretical framework for their sports diplomacy endeavors. This then is the *dark side* (Murray, 2018) of Taekwondo diplomacy: neither WT nor ITF may have a clear peacebuilding plan nor training in how to create one outside of hosting competitions between the two organizations’ athletes.

The concept of evolving from a cultural diplomacy model to a sport diplomacy one also comes with significant risks. For one, a winning, ‘might makes right’ scenario could derail any peace efforts by creating a real or perceived advantage for one side. A second hazard is the very real possibility of exacerbating, rather than relieving, tensions between the ROK and DPRK. There also exists the prospect of failing to influence the target audience, the citizens of both Koreas, to embrace the idea of rapprochement. The question, and quest, that lay ahead for WT and ITF leaders remains the same: how do we continue to build peace through Taekwondo? The answer is, for once, relatively simple. Taekwondo actors should keep doing what has seemingly worked until now with one slight modification.

Galtung’s (1973, 2004, 2007) CRT could provide a theoretical framework for future Taekwondo diplomatic efforts between the two Koreas. CRT has already been suggested as a model for WT/ITF competitions (Johnson, 2020), and it is more applicable to peacebuilding efforts than competition. Although it seems counterintuitive to use one of the world’s most popular martial arts and combat sports diplomatically without athletes engaging in any competition, CRT provides a theoretical framework in which Taekwondo can be practiced differently by ROK and DPRK athletes while maintaining respect for each culture’s differences (see also Galtung, 1973, 2004, 2007).

Accordingly, this study recommends WT and the ITF adapt CRT as a theoretical framework for their Taekwondo diplomacy work. A theoretical peacebuilding framework based on Galtung’s (1973, 2004, 2007) CRT could guide WT and the ITF away from competition (sports diplomacy) and continue evolving joint demonstrations (cultural diplomacy). If done, the Taekwondo organizations could build upon their cultural diplomacy successes, avoid likely pitfalls of sports diplomacy, and continue their peacebuilding endeavors within an accepted theoretical framework. Additionally, WT and ITF leaders should work with Peace Study experts using Galtung’s (1973, 2004, 2007) CRT framework to create a policy that adheres to the sports diplomacy efforts undertaken by the WT, the ITF’s martial arts philosophies, and previous successful peacebuilding initiatives. Modifying their current strategy

so it includes a CRT lens could eliminate the hazards that seem to be inherent in using Taekwondo as a form of sports diplomacy. As such, WT and ITF diplomacy/peacebuilding endeavors would likely stand a stronger likelihood of success.

## LIMITATIONS

One limitation of this study is the lack of empirical research on the effect of Taekwondo diplomacy on the ROK and DPRK Korean populaces. The majority of literature reporting on Taekwondo diplomacy is positive but nonacademic. Researchers have yet to present empirical evidence proving Taekwondo diplomatic efforts have furthered peace. Future quantitative research would shed light on the Taekwondo diplomacy's efficacy, which would in turn guide future Taekwondo studies and diplomatic policies and decisions. One foreseeable complication with this future line of study is the lack of accessibility to DPRK citizens by outside researchers. We must therefore depend on successive interactions with the DPRK/ITF Taekwondo organization as signs of Taekwondo peacebuilding successes.

The results of the literature review also revealed no empirical evidence of Taekwondo diplomacy or peacebuilding efficacy. Researchers could perform innumerable studies in this area, including the effect televised joint demonstrations may have on the ROK populace, which would indicate their willingness to support future Taekwondo diplomacy/peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, empirical studies are needed to validate the investment of the WT and ITF resources.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Following previous research on Taekwondo as a sport and martial art (Johnson, 2020; Moenig, Choi, & Kim, 2021), this paper presents Korean terms in the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system. Authors have Romanized 태권도 (Taegwŏn-do) over the years in numerous ways, so the term is presented herein as Taekwondo, now a loan word from Korean, to avoid confusion. The sole exception to this is General Choi, Hong Hi's preferred spelling of "Taekwon-Do," which is only used in proper names of the organization he presided over until his passing. Korean names are presented in the Asian tradition with the surname first and rendered in the person's preferred Romanization for easier reference.