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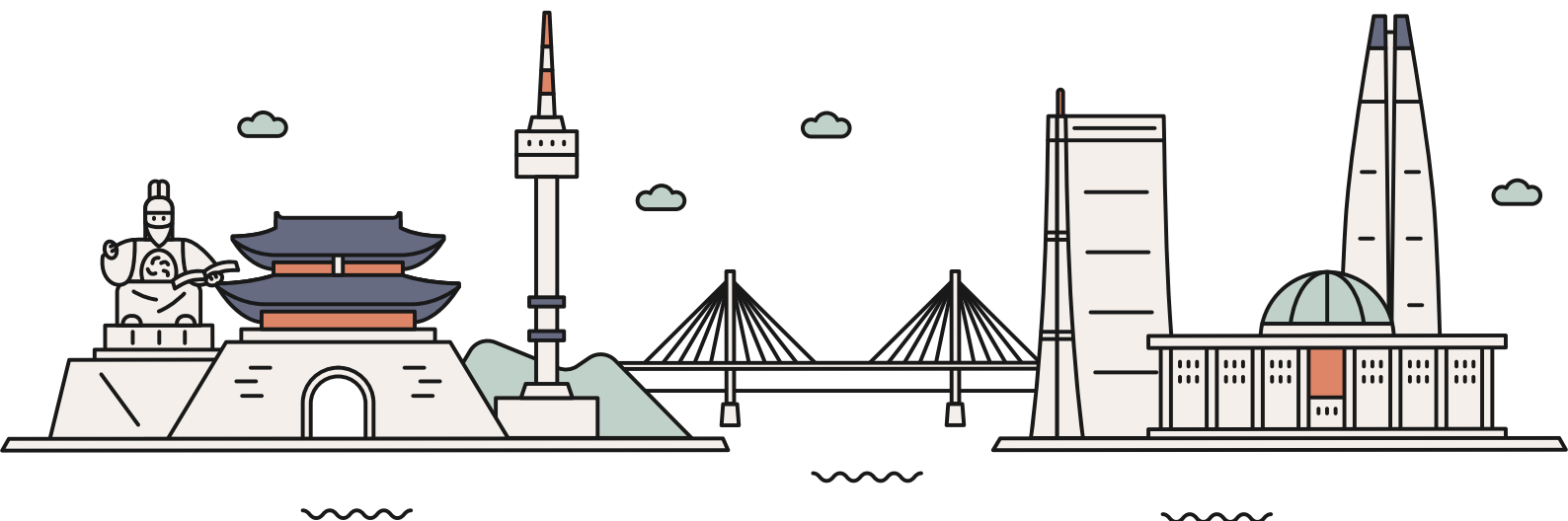
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Fostering International Cooperation: South Korea's Sports ODA and the K-Silk Road Initiative

JEON HONGPYO,
Visiting Research Fellow





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1. INTRODUCTION

Following Korea's liberation in 1945, the country relied heavily on international aid, particularly from the United States. After the Korean War (1950–1953), Korea received continued assistance from the United States, Germany, Japan, and multilateral organizations. By 1975, Korea graduated from receiving aid from the International Development Association (IDA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), marking a turning point in its development. In 1991, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) recognized Korea as a net donor of technical assistance, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) was established the same year [1].

Since then, KOICA has implemented multi-sectoral grant aid programs in developing countries, focusing on education, access to clean water, infrastructure, and gender equality. Beyond traditional Official Development Assistance (ODA), sports ODA has emerged as a distinctive platform for addressing health challenges in developing nations by promoting physical activity and raising awareness of health issues. Furthermore, sports ODA strengthens bonds between recipient and donor countries, fostering enhanced relationships within the context of shifting international dynamics.

2. SPORTS ODA: CATALYST IN GLOBAL DYNAMICS

In the context of the K-Silk Road Initiative — a strategic policy by the Republic of Korea targeting Central Asia's geopolitical significance, mineral and gas resources, and opportunities for cultural exchange — sports ODA serves as a powerful catalyst for strengthening relations between South Korea and Central Asia. This is particularly crucial amid shifting international dynamics, including the Ukraine-Russia war, the election of Donald Trump, and other global changes.

[1] Korea International Cooperation Agency. History as a Recipient Country. Accessed at https://www.oda.go.kr/opo/odin/mainInfoPage.do?P_SCRIN_ID=OPOA603010S01.



The United Nations has outlined 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote global peace and prosperity, focusing on eradicating poverty, improving health and education, achieving gender equality, and fostering economic growth and human rights. Sports ODA directly contributes to specific SDGs, such as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). By promoting societal integration and upholding human rights, sports ODA plays a vital role in advancing these global objectives.

3. KOREA'S SPORTS ODA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Aligned with sports ODA's mission of promoting peace and prosperity, the Korean Sport & Olympic Committee annually organizes joint training programs, inviting athletes from developing countries to participate. Since 2013, this initiative, known as "*Dream Together*", has provided valuable training opportunities for athletes worldwide.

For example, the Uzbek national wrestling team trained at the Jincheon National Training Center in [2], while the national judo team collaborated with Korean athletes at Yongin University in 2014 [3]. In 2019, athletes from Kazakhstan (ice hockey, triathlon), Uzbekistan (wrestling), and Kyrgyzstan (triathlon, modern pentathlon, judo) participated in joint training sessions [4].

In 2022, the program included 230 participants across 13 sports disciplines from 8 countries, significantly enhancing the performance of athletes from developing nations. Kyrgyzstan, for instance, secured three bronze medals at the 2022 World Wrestling Championships, marking a major milestone on the global stage [5]. By 2023, the program expanded to 269 participants from 25 countries across 16 sports disciplines, showcasing its growing impact and scope. This sustained initiative continues to empower athletes from developing countries, improving their competitiveness and fostering international cooperation.

In Central Asia, Korean coaches have been dispatched to support the development of archery. Coach Kim Myeong-seon was sent to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, during which the Uzbek national archery team participated in the Hyundai Archery World Cup in Yecheon, South [6]. In 2023, Coach Kim Je-cheon was dispatched to Kazakhstan to further enhance the region's archery skills [7]. The Korean Sport & Olympic Committee

[2] Yonhap News. "Korean Sport & Olympic Committee Invites Athletes from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Cambodia to Jincheon Training Center." December 8, 2017. Accessed at <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20171208084900007>.

[3] Kim, S. "The Korean Sports Association Acts as Hallyu Cultural Ambassadors for Athletes from Developing Countries." The Korea NGO News, June 8, 2014. Accessed at https://www.ngonews.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=59761#google_vignette.

[4] Korean Sport & Olympic Committee. 2019 Project Performance Report, 2020.

[5] Korean Sport & Olympic Committee. 2022 Project Performance Report, 2023.

[6] Korean Sport & Olympic Committee. 2023 Project Performance Report, January 2024.

[7] Korean Sport & Olympic Committee. 2022 Project Performance Report, 2023.



monitors these programs by collecting monthly reports from coaches and conducting satisfaction surveys among athletes from developing [8]. Such initiatives not only foster the development of sports techniques but also create employment opportunities for retired athletes, empowering recipient countries' sports capabilities.

The sports coaching education program for developing countries also aims to cultivate local international coaches. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first online international coaching certification courses for triathlon were introduced in 2021, accredited by international federations. That year, the program supported 142 participants from 48 countries across three disciplines. Additionally, from August to November 2021, an online triathlon course was conducted. In Central Asia, Taekwondo coaches from Uzbekistan and cycling coaches from Kyrgyzstan participated in offline training sessions [9].

4. K-SILK ROAD INITIATIVE: ENHANCING COOPERATION THROUGH SPORTS ODA

The Republic of Korea's sports ODA initiatives in Central Asia demonstrate a sustained commitment, strengthening cooperative relations between Korea and Central Asia while contributing to the implementation of the K-Silk Road Initiative. The key priorities of the K-Silk Road Initiative, announced by the Korean government in June 2024, are encapsulated in the acronym ROAD: Resource, ODA, Accompany, and Drive. Among these, "Accompany" emphasizes the establishment of a partnership-based network between Korea and Central Asia, focusing on fostering interpersonal exchanges and cultural cooperation. Meanwhile, "Drive" highlights the facilitation of the initiative through a public-private cooperation network linking Korea and Central Asia [10].

In line with these objectives, current programs led by the Korean Sport & Olympic Committee, such as joint training sessions with athletes from developing countries and the dispatch of coaches and trainers, are designed to enhance the capacity of athletes and coaches while contributing to the development of sports infrastructure in developing nations.

By actively implementing the "Cultural Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding" signed on June 14, 2024, as a part of K-Silk Road Initiative, the agreement includes support for the Uzbekistan Taekwondo tournament carried out for September 2024, as well as joint training for national teams from developing countries, specifically for 23 athletes in the field of fencing [11].

These efforts can enhance the perception of Korea within Central Asia, fostering a

[8] Korean Sport & Olympic Committee. 2023 Project Performance Report, January 2024.

[9] Korean Sport & Olympic Committee. 2021 Project Performance Report, 2022

[10] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea. Republic of Korea-Central Asia K-Silk Road Cooperation Initiative. Accessed at https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/wpge/m_27586/contents.do.

[11] Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. "Press Release: South Korea and Uzbekistan Open a New Chapter in Cultural Exchange." June 17, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.korea.kr/common/download.do?fileId=197773021&tblKey=GMN>.



favorable image and positioning Korea as a reliable partner in economic, societal cooperation and diplomacy through its ODA activities. Such initiatives contribute to achieving the “Resource” component of the K-Silk Road Initiative, a key priority aimed at resource collaboration. Building on this foundation of trust-based partnerships, South Korea can establish a robust framework for cooperation in the sectors of natural gas and mineral resources.

5. SPORTS ODA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Furthermore, the proactive utilization of sports ODA can significantly contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and advancing humanitarian objectives. Regarding SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), as of 2023, approximately half of Uzbekistan’s population aged 18–64 is classified as overweight, with 20% categorized as obese [12]. Considering that individuals aged 15–64 make up over 78.8% of Uzbekistan’s total population, it can be inferred that more than half of the working-age population is affected by being overweight [13]. Additionally, the average daily salt consumption in Uzbekistan is 14.9 grams—three times higher than the World Health Organization’s recommended limit of 5 grams per day [14]. Looking ahead, the World Obesity Federation projects that by 2030 and 2060, the proportion of adults in Uzbekistan classified as overweight or obese will rise to 59% and 80%, respectively [15].

The health-adjusted life expectancy in Uzbekistan is 63.4 years, below the European average of 66 years and significantly lower than South Korea’s 72.5 years. Similarly, the overall life expectancy in Uzbekistan is 72.2 years, compared to South Korea’s 83.8 years, the Western Pacific average of 77.4 years, and the European average of 76.3 years [16]. The leading cause of death in Uzbekistan is ischemic heart disease, accounting for 237.4 deaths per 100,000 people, followed by stroke at 75.9 deaths per 100,000 people [17].

The incidence of ischemic heart disease is nearly three times higher than that of stroke, highlighting its status as the primary cause of mortality. Risk factors, including hypertension, dyslipidemia, obesity, and smoking, are well-documented [18]. These

[12] KUN.UZ. "Half of the Population of Uzbekistan Is Overweight. - SanEpid Committee." December 5, 2023. Accessed at <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/12/05/half-of-the-population-of-uzbekistan-is-overweight-sanepid-committee>.

[13] World Health Organization. WHO Data - Uzbekistan. Accessed at <https://data.who.int/countries/860>.

[14] KUN.UZ. "Half of the Population of Uzbekistan Is Overweight. - SanEpid Committee." December 5, 2023. Accessed at <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/12/05/half-of-the-population-of-uzbekistan-is-overweight-sanepid-committee>.

[15] Gazeta.uz. "Uzbekistan’s Economic Damage from Obesity Expected to Rise to 4.7% of GDP by 2060." December 18, 2023. Accessed at <https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2023/12/18/economic-damage-from-obesity-in-uzbekistan/>.

[16] World Health Organization. WHO Data - Republic of Korea. Accessed at <https://data.who.int/countries/410>.

[17] World Health Organization. WHO Data - Uzbekistan. Accessed at <https://data.who.int/countries/860>.

[18] Samsung Medical Center. Coronary Artery Disease. Accessed at http://www.samsunghospital.com/dept/main/index.do?DP_CODE=DM&MENU_ID=001030051.



issues are largely attributed to Central Asia's dietary patterns, characterized by high-fat consumption, physical inactivity, and increasingly modernized lifestyles.

To address these challenges, promoting sports ODA projects for both professional athletes and the general population in Central Asia is essential. Establishing sports centers in the region could encourage healthy physical activity and lifestyle habits, improving overall health and quality of life for the population.

Currently, sports ODA has been primarily spearheaded by the Korea Sports & Olympic Committee under the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. However, there is a pressing need to expand the scope and budget of such initiatives through collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and KOICA. Furthermore, sports ODA should be clearly positioned as a component of cultural ODA to facilitate large-scale investments. Such efforts would contribute to enhancing health standards, reducing mortality rates, and improving quality of life in Central Asia, ultimately supporting the achievement of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being).

Sports play a significant role in promoting social integration, fostering inter-state exchange and development, and advancing social equity. These contributions align directly and indirectly with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), ultimately supporting the development of amicable relations between Korea and Central Asia. Initiatives such as inviting athletes from various disciplines—including judo, ice hockey, wrestling, and triathlon—for joint training programs not only facilitate technical exchanges in these sports but also serve as platforms for cultural exchange. Through joint training sessions, participating nations share sportsmanship and promote cultural understanding, creating an environment where diverse perspectives on sports are exchanged within a transnational framework. This transforms sports into a mechanism for fostering international participation and cross-cultural engagement.

For instance, in 2014, the Uzbek national judo team participated in joint training sessions with the Korean national judo team and Yong In University's judo team. As part of a Korean cultural experience program during their stay, they attended a traditional dance drama, *Baebijang-jeon*, performed at Jeongdong Theater on August 8 [19]. This integration of sports training with cultural experiences demonstrates the potential of sports ODA to bridge cultural divides and foster international cooperation.

Uzbekistan's traditional sport, Kurash, was officially included as a competitive event in the 2018 Jakarta Asian Games, the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games, and is scheduled for the 2026 Nagoya Asian Games. South Korea currently fields a national Kurash team with seven male and seven female athletes, most of whom have a background in judo [20][21].

[19] Lim, S. "Uzbek Judo Team Watches Traditional Dance Drama 'Baebijang-jeon' Together." News 1, June 6, 2014. Accessed at <https://www.news1.kr/sports/general-sport/1711190>.

[20] Korea Kurash Federation. Athlete Information. Accessed at <http://koreakurash.kr/sub.php?code=39>.

[21] Lee, J., and Park, C. "Monologue About the Journey of Participation in Kurash." *Journal of Sports Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2023): 113–128.

Consequently, there is a pressing need for Korean athletes to learn traditional Kurash techniques and enhance their skills through exchanges with Uzbek athletes, the sport's originators.

Uzbek athletes play a vital role in advancing Kurash by sharing their expertise with Korean counterparts. However, while Korean culture is widely recognized in Uzbekistan, Uzbek culture remains underrepresented in South Korea. Kurash offers a unique opportunity to bridge this cultural gap, fostering mutual understanding and promoting public diplomacy. This balanced approach not only prevents cultural imperialism but also aligns with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). By facilitating genuine cultural exchange, Kurash can become a meaningful platform for equitable public diplomacy between the two nations.

6. CONCLUSION

South Korea's sports ODA has consistently invested in initiatives such as inviting athletes from developing countries for joint training sessions, dispatching coaches, and providing educational programs for sports leaders. Since 2013, the "Dream Together Seoul Forum," organized annually by Seoul National University in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, has served as a key platform for advancing sports ODA. This forum brings together experts from the sports industry and academia to discuss international development cooperation and ODA projects in [22]. In 2024, the forum explored the theme "The Advancement of AI Technologies and the Future of Sports," highlighting the transformative potential of cutting-edge technologies in sports.

In the era of AI, sports ODA must transcend traditional approaches by leveraging advanced technologies to implement innovative and scientific solutions in recipient countries. For instance, South Korea employed "Neuro Feedback" technology during the 2016 Rio Olympics to analyze archery athletes' brain waves, helping them train their psychological responses under match conditions. In fencing, 3D motion capture technology was used to analyze joint movements precisely, identifying areas for improvement [23].

AI technologies are transforming various sports disciplines, opening new horizons for innovation. For example, IBM annually introduces groundbreaking advancements at the Masters Tournament, one of golf's four major championships (PGA). In 2024, it launched the "Hole Insights" service, powered by its generative AI platform, Watsonx, providing data analysis and predictive insights for each hole on the course [24]. Similarly, the

[22] An, Y. "Dream Together Seoul Forum 2024 Hosted by the Korea Sports Promotion Foundation." News 1, October 24, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.news1.kr/sports/general-sport/5578318>.

[23] Park, T. "[Interesting Science] Behind Korea's Archery '10·10·10' Was Neurofeedback." The Chosun Ilbo, August 16, 2016. Accessed at https://newsteacher.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/08/15/2016081501918.html.

[24] Jang, E. "The Global Sports AI Market Grows to 39 trillion Won... 'Hyper-Personalized' Content Is Key." The Dong-A Ilbo, October 5, 2024. Accessed at <https://www.donga.com/news/Economy/article/all/20241004/130157152/2>.



application of AI technologies in other sports has the potential to revolutionize training and coaching systems, enabling more effective strategies and significant improvements in performance.

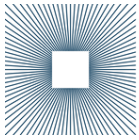
South Korea's leadership in AI is also notable, ranking sixth in the AI Readiness Index among 83 countries worldwide (Tortoise Media, 2024). In comparison, Kazakhstan ranks 47th, Kyrgyzstan 99th, Tajikistan 123rd, and Uzbekistan 131st, according to the IMF's 2023 AI Preparedness Index, with Turkmenistan excluded from the ranking [25]. These rankings highlight the need for AI-based ODA collaboration between South Korea and Central Asian countries.

Leveraging its advanced AI capabilities, South Korea could develop tools to enhance athletic performance, integrate these tools into sports ODA initiatives, and share them with Central Asia. Such efforts would strengthen the competitive capabilities of Central Asian nations while promoting mutual development through sports exchanges within the framework of the K-Silk Road Initiative.

Expanding AI-powered sports ODA to include not only professional athletes but also the general population in recipient countries could yield broader benefits. By analyzing health conditions and disease prevalence, tailored sports ODA projects could be implemented to foster greater sports participation, improve public health, and contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In conclusion, integrating AI into sports ODA presents a pivotal opportunity for South Korea to enhance its cultural and economic ties with Central Asia. This approach could serve as a breakthrough for effectively advancing the K-Silk Road Initiative amid shifting global dynamics.

[25] Nakispekova, A. "Kazakhstan Ranks in Top 50 Countries for AI Readiness." The Astana Times, November 8, 2024. Accessed at <https://astanatimes.com/2024/11/kazakhstan-ranks-in-top-50-countries-for-ai-readiness/>.



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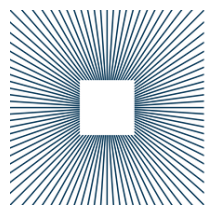
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Institute for Advanced International Studies
at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy
54, Mustakillik Avenue
Tashkent 100007, Uzbekistan

 +998 71 267 58 44

 info@iais.uz

 www.iais.uz



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**Institute for Advanced
International Studies**