

Malice in wonderland

By Bunn Nagara



Interesting times: Malaysian police officers standing guard outside the North Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur. AP

At first, it seemed simple enough, but it was just the opposite: a foreign man is accosted with a lethal face rub by two foreign women at KL International Airport 2.

He is disoriented and dies. The women are arrested with two other suspects on suspicion of murder.

Four more suspects, all North Korean, had just left Malaysia for home.

A North Korean diplomat and another compatriot, both “persons of interest” in the police investigation, are still at large and believed to be hiding in the North Korean embassy.

The embassy refuses to cooperate, but instead demands that Malaysian authorities hand over the remains of the deceased. Since it was not the next of kin, that did not happen.

It also tried to stop the post-mortem of the deceased, but again it failed. Malaysia stuck with standard procedure.

North Korean Ambassador Kang Chol denounced the investigation and was asked to apologise, but he did not. Malaysia declared him persona non grata and he left.

A phased escalation in tension coincided with an unravelling of relations between Malaysia and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

A series of disjunctures, anomalies and incongruities was paraded by way of undiplomatic statements by the DPRK.

The North Koreans insisted that Malaysian authorities cooperate with them, but they refused to cooperate in return.

They did not conduct the post-mortem on the deceased, but they “knew” he did not die of poison. Somehow, they even knew he had died of a “heart attack.”

They were not privy to the police investigation but presumed to know enough to denigrate it. How could they know it was inadequate or improper?

They refused to volunteer information for the investigation, thus denying the police any additional clues. Were they deliberately hampering the findings?

They said they were entitled to the remains of the deceased because he was a North Korean citizen. Yet, they denied he was Kim Jong-nam.

The deceased was travelling under the name "Kim Chol," but the Kim Chol they knew was the former North Korean Army Vice-Minister executed in 2012.

The one who died in Malaysia might not have been a North Korean citizen. Who can really tell without his birth certificate or DNA?

The deceased was neither going to nor had come from North Korea, so what connection could he have had with that country? On what basis could anyone assume he was North Korean?

Without answers to these questions, DPRK diplomats could not impress on Malaysian police their right to retrieve the remains.

As the death occurred in Malaysia, the police are required to conduct investigations. As they said, they had no interest whatsoever in Korean politics.

If North Korean diplomats had a problem with that, the fault was not Malaysia's. Perhaps they were just not getting their way.

There are at least three issues at play.

First, Malaysia played by the book when that was required. It is important to abide by standard operating procedures.

It is particularly important to remain unaffected by the political sentiments and pressures of others. Sticking to universally established lawful procedure, without fear or favour, is key.

Nothing less would be expected of a nation like Malaysia. It is a non-aligned country averse to being manipulated by external powers for their own vested interests.

The greater the external pressures, the more some countries might be tempted to buckle. But it is also more reason to stand firm.

The first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman declared that the country would be a friend to all other countries that would be its friend.

In being such a friend, regardless of another country's political or economic system, also meant not being an ally in any particular "bloc".

That would only mean making friends with some at the expense of making enemies of others.

So the Cold War was not a game Malaysia played.

Non-alignment for Malaysia meant it was free to establish relations with countries on all "sides". Among the many countries that Malaysia developed diplomatic relations with was North Korea.

As part of the DPRK's diplomatic "outreach" in the early 1970s, official relations were established between Pyongyang and Kuala Lumpur in 1973.

This even preceded formal diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China, which happened only a year later.

Malaysia-DPRK relations grew slowly but steadily. It took another 30 years before embassies were established in both countries.

In 2009, mutual visa-free travel for the nationals of both countries became the norm. Despite the negative attitude of some governments towards North Korea, Malaysia made its own decisions and hoped for the best.

Mutual relations developed based on growing trust and confidence. Goodwill grew through three generations of North Korea's Kim family leadership, or at least until the third generation.

So what happens now?

The second basic issue is that both countries understand the need for diplomacy to work. And they know that it works best in confidential discussions.

Former Ambassador Kang Chol has packed up and gone home. However, even though he was ambassador when he delivered his Pyongyang-approved speech aimed at Malaysia, diplomatic relations between the two countries did not end with his departure.

A senior-level delegation led by Ri Tong-il, former North Korean Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations, arrived in Malaysia a week before the ambassador was ejected.

The delegation remained in Malaysia afterwards for quiet discussions on bilateral relations with their Malaysian counterparts.

Little is known about these discussions other than both countries seek to arrest the rapid decline in relations and to pull back from the diplomatic impasse.

Malaysia does not bear any ill will towards any country. Until now, no Malaysian government or police official has accused any foreign government of the murder.

It is important for a country in Malaysia's position to continue conducting matters professionally and diplomatically, according to established rules and set procedures.

The third issue at work here is North Korea's relations with the rest of the world. More specifically, it may relate to Pyongyang's relations with Beijing.

If South Korea is correct in implicating the North, then it has been a campaign orchestrated in Pyongyang for some years already.

The deceased has now been identified by Malaysian police as Kim Jong-nam, the estranged half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Jong-nam had long had ties to China, which in turn has been North Korea's only significant ally. But Koreans generally know that Chinese President Xi Jinping and Jong-un are not exactly "bosom buddies."

Jong-nam's and China's point man in Pyongyang had been the Kim half-brothers' uncle, Jang Song-thaek.

Jang had three distinctive positions when he was executed for "treachery": a very senior post, a strong advocate of economic reform over military growth, and a confidant of Jong-nam and China.

He could have been killed for any one or more of these reasons, or none at all. It is a byzantine system trapped in an Orwellian world within a Kafkaesque universe.

And part of it is occasional testimony that Jang is still alive. Whatever the implications, Malaysia the friendly country would have none of it.

So while speculating on any of this may serve the interests of some countries, Malaysians see no point in taking it further.

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