

Seoul-ful search for peace

By Bunn Nagara



Provocative move: A man walking past a television screen showing a news broadcast on North Korea's nuclear test at Gimhae International Airport in Busan, South Korea. — Bloomberg

Today's S. Korea is caught between several rocks and hard places, but the hazy ideal of Korean reunification remains undiminished regardless of the mounting challenges.

WHAT does an international security conference in South Korea do when North Korea has just fired off a series of test missiles while pressing ahead with its nuclear weapons programme?

The predictable thing to do is to add more security. And that was how the Westin Chosun hotel in Seoul went into lockdown for much of the week.

The lobby was swarming with more security people than guests, as men in suits with coiled wires sprouting from their ears were everywhere. There were scanners and metal detectors like those at airports, and people were told strictly where they could go and where they couldn't.

The Fifth Seoul Defence Dialogue (SDD) was in full swing. The annual series might have become a rather staid item in East Asia's schedule of regular conferences before, but not this time.

Up north, Kim Jong-un had become feisty. A series of test missiles had just been launched, and Pyongyang topped them all off on Friday morning – as the SDD drew to a close – with its fifth nuclear bomb test.

As a nuclear-armed state, North Korea has for years been known to possess several nuclear warheads. But its rocket delivery system still “needs work” to ensure they do not literally fall short by landing on home ground – yet again.

Its long-range missiles or ICBMs (inter-continental ballistic missiles) capable of reaching the US remain under development, while short- and medium-range missiles are somewhat better developed.

And its favoured targets have long remained the same: South Korea and Japan.

Why the sudden shift to a war footing? North and South Korea had been at war and technically still are, since only a prolonged truce rather than a formal peace had been established.

And what would war solve, if anything at all? But since it's North Korea, many would say, the normal calculus of strategic reasoning would not apply.

Still, there is a tendency to mistake the highly personal, seemingly erratic and apparently eccentric antics of Jong-un (third ruler in the Kim dynasty) as irrational or even crazy.

But not so, many experts on North Korea would say. Pyongyang just works from a quite different geopolitical frame of reference.

And thus the Westin Chosun came to be "securitised" – plainclothes security personnel were even stationed in corridors leading to the rooms of foreign guests, seeming to double in number each day.

Conference participants being transported to scheduled dinners had police escorts all the way. Motorists in Seoul may have been inconvenienced, but there were no complaints from the delegates.

There are of course other reasons why the casual tourist may regard the conference venue as having succumbed to acute South Korean state paranoia.

To government officials in particular, the real or perceived threat from the North is not imaginary. And they repeatedly make that perfectly clear to all conference participants. Besides, public officials are supposed to have the public interest uppermost, so they would take no chances with perceptions becoming reality. Precautions needed to be taken.

This was also an opportunity for the National Defence Ministry, sponsors of the SDD, to impress its guests. It complemented the generally superb organisation and attention to detail given to each participant.

The six scheduled sessions covered "Korean Unification and Global Security," "Global Peace Leadership and Peace Operations," "Violent Extremism and Terrorism," "Dual-use Technologies: Challenges and Tasks," "Maritime Security Cooperation," and "Cyber Security Challenges and Defence Cooperation."

The deliberations benefited many, in particular those new to these discourses. But there were also some limitations.

Issues tended to be repetitious from one year's conference to the next. Many of the themes were also replicable, and continue to be replicated, in other conferences elsewhere.

There was the familiar concern that in addressing security issues, policy measures tended to treat the symptoms rather than the causes.

Another session looked at the range of UN peace operations, from establishing and monitoring a ceasefire to peacemaking and peace building.

But UN operations are not without their drawbacks. Among their strengths are the status and prestige of a judicious global multilateral organisation, but their limits are also considerable.

The scope of UN institutions is limited to willing and committed member states. Nations unwilling to comply, non-member states, and non-state actors including terrorist groups are free to ignore them.

Examples of Asean member nations coming together to address common regional security concerns were cited favourably. But one of these, the Malacca Straits Patrol, was accused by a researcher of lacking even basic data.

The response was that such data was classified. Still, the matter of states having to share data for the common good when faced with common problems remained.

It was suggested that states may be reluctant to share information because such information tended to be the property of private firms. Another possibility was that the information may be the result of unlawful or unfriendly surveillance of a friendly country.

Besides its nuclear warheads, Pyongyang is also known for developing a stockpile of chemical weapons. However little the international community may be able to do to limit nuclear weapons proliferation, it can do even less about chemical weapons – and less still with biological weapons.

A popular theme was cyber security. An ICT specialist admitted that even years after the grave dangers of an EMP (electro-magnetic pulse) attack knocking out an entire country's ICT-controlled systems were highlighted, there is still very little with which to counteract it.

A basic issue remains the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. The South wants the North to remove all its nuclear weapons forthwith, but real lasting peace must also include tempering conventional weapons and forces on both sides.

An impressive range of countries provided participants for the conference, but it could have been even better. A Japanese participant said discussions would have been helped with more Chinese participants.

More to the point, there could have been some North Korean participants at least. Their complete absence did not speak well for efforts at inclusiveness and a diplomatic outreach.

Former president Kim Dae-jung had exercised an outreach policy that has since been seen as having failed. But it may be worth trying again, given the new leadership in Pyongyang for whom even "basketball diplomacy" seems worthwhile.

Many may have missed the significance of the Westin Chosun, Korea's oldest hotel, as the site of this important conference. The earlier hotel on the site was the Chosun, named after the redoubtable Chosun dynasty that had ruled the entire Korean peninsula for half a millennium.

For Korean analysts today, a reunified Korea is a distant dream at best. This is not least because Korea's powerful neighbours, China and Japan, have their own reasons for opposing reunification.

China is said to prefer North Korea as it is, acting as a buffer. Japan is believed to fear a reunified Korea becoming a powerful industrial rival that would further diminish Japan's global competitiveness.

Still, if reunification is ever to become a reality, there are far less suitable places to initiate it than the Westin Chosun.

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