

By Bunn Nagara

Casting a spotlight on the Koreans

To understand the peninsula's situation better in forming appropriate responses, clear away misconceptions, presumptions and prejudices – especially the familiar and established ones.

THE “Hermit Kingdom,” or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, better known as North Korea, has been busy making waves on land, air and sea.

While in Malaysia it became known for staging the KLIA2 assassination of airline passenger Kim Jong-nam, half-brother of dictator Kim Jong-un, it is Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons development that unnerves much of the world.

Speculation abounds over what is happening in more than a dozen nuclear sites, from just north of Seoul to just south of Vladivostok. The reclusive hermit nature of Pyongyang’s Stalinist system ensures that nobody on the outside and few on the inside really know.

Worse, much speculation is based on presumptions coloured by ideology and rejecting the realities of the day. A proper understanding requires a more mature and realistic approach.

Among the realities to be acknowledged is the genuine fear in Pyongyang of destabilisation by its adversaries, led principally by the US. The 1950-53 Korean War saw the US and Japan on the side of South Korea, with China and the Soviet Union on North Korea’s.

Officially, the war has not ended, since the halt to hostilities came only with an armistice (temporary truce) rather than a peace treaty. Today some 30,000 US troops are stationed in South Korea and nearly twice that number in Japan.

While North Korea has long depended on the limited sophistication of Soviet and Chinese military technology, the US, Japan and South Korea enjoy superior military capabilities. And while the North Korean army boasts more than a million soldiers, the gap in technological capacity and sheer firepower remains.

To compensate for its battlefield liabilities, Pyongyang embarked on a phased nuclear weapons programme in 1956. It began with very basic information gathering, then developed irregularly through six decades.

At no point has North Korea indicated that its nuclear weapons programme is simply for the sake of developing it. Instead, it has repeatedly sought a peace deal with the US, with a “four eyes” summit with the US President an established goal.

Another important reality, therefore, is that Pyongyang requires massive assurances that no country seeks its defeat or destruction. So far, it does not appear convinced.

The irony is that while the US is the key country to assure North Korea that international concern is only about its nuclear weapons, with no plans for its demise, the US does not have an unblemished record in dealing with edgy countries with alternative worldviews.

In the last two presidencies alone, George W. Bush spent two terms making “regime change” a global phenomenon while consigning North Korea to the “Axis of Evil.” For another two presidential terms, Barack Obama was reluctant to even talk to North Korea, let alone sign a peace deal to end the war.

Yet, another basic reality is that tensions generated by Pyongyang’s nuclear programme cannot be resolved by military force at all, with or without diplomacy. Armed force will only negate any diplomacy and guarantee the return to war that all sides say they want to avoid.

Much talk has focused on two aspects of North Korea’s arms development in particular: ballistic missile sophistication, particularly initial use of solid fuel, and nuclear payload technology which the missiles carry.

Kim Jong-un recently announced a breakthrough in ballistic missile development, even the ability to strike the US Navy or Guam. However accurate or true that may be, or otherwise, is another matter.

North Korean missile development has long been plagued with poor technology and failures. Despite Pyongyang’s boasts and fears among its critics, missile capability has remained questionable for decades.

A test conducted five weeks ago this weekend resulted in missile debris falling onto North Korean territory. Another test two weeks ago saw the missile fall into the sea less than 100km from Vladivostok.

Nuclear payload development is another issue. Serious estimates place a working nuclear-armed missile some years from now.

US territory and assets are still beyond the reach of a North Korean onslaught. So what do the *USS Carl Vinson* and its carrier group do, but steam towards the western Pacific to be within range?

Meanwhile, satellite imagery has reportedly shown increased activity in and around the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. Foreign punters are now probably more primed than the site itself for what could be Pyongyang’s sixth nuclear test in just over a decade.

Each country in the Six-Party Talks to resolve Pyongyang’s nuclear gamble – the US, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia, with North Korea itself – has its own reasons for avoiding a sudden collapse of the country from whatever means.

Since North Korea does not pose a “clear and present danger” to the US, Washington is largely guided by its allies Japan and South Korea as well as UN Security Council Permanent Members China and Russia.

China is averse to its prickly neighbour’s disintegration for fear of the humanitarian crisis overflowing across the border with a mass exodus of refugees. It will impact on more than a few of China’s provinces and may prove more than the authorities are prepared to handle.

China is also known to prefer North Korea’s presence as a buffer against US ally South Korea. A reunified Korea could mean an enlarged South Korea with US military forces sharing a border with China.

Japan is also wary of a reunified Korea following a collapse of Pyongyang. A basically enlarged South Korea would become stronger and more competitive, when it has now already equalled or surpassed Japan in several industries.

Such a stronger Korea is also likely to be more nationalistic. For reasons of history, South Koreans including the postwar generation are already the most bitter of Japan’s wartime victims.

At the same time, South Korea does not exactly relish the prospect of reunification in the form of a sudden blast. A phased “deflation” of the North may work, but that would not result from open conflict.

The general expectation is that the North is teetering on the brink of an abrupt and forceful collapse. That may be the propaganda of Pyongyang’s enemies, but it may also be true.

Russia is concerned like everyone else but not really alarmed. As a former if not current ally of North Korea, it knows that any missiles would be pointed the other way.

One principal reality seldom if ever recognised is the outstanding anomaly that while Pyongyang’s nuclear missiles are supposed to be the threat, alarm is expressed over its nuclear tests instead.

One research colleague in China, no friend of North Korea, put it bluntly when he said he hoped they would conduct more nuclear tests. When asked why, he simply said that the more fissile material Pyongyang uses for its tests, the less it has left for arming its missiles.

He says North Korea has a limited supply of fissile material for nuclear devices. He knows, because he has been keeping count.

Thus another reality, yet to be confirmed, is that the missile and nuclear tests are meant more for posturing than for actual weapons. That may be why the US and North Korea’s neighbours are posturing back by responding.

It may also explain why the *Carl Vinson* has dared to come within firing range.

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