

North Korean tensions

Inside the cult of Kim

Despite doomsday warnings, life continues as abnormal as ever in the capital



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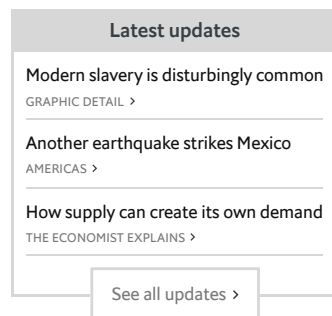


IT IS hard to talk about normality in North Korea. But as its leaders each day cranked up the threats of merciless all-out war with America and South Korea, residents in and around the capital, Pyongyang, appeared to be busier preparing for the coming of spring than a coming war.

At a time of high tension on the Korean peninsula, a propaganda blitz in Pyongyang warning of something akin to a doomsday “do-or-die” battle was relentless. On March 26th people crowded around television screens to watch a newsreader in pink bark out orders from the top brass of the Korean People’s Army for field units to be ready to attack American bases and conduct “physical action” against South Korea.

ADVERTISING

As the days wore on, the threats increased to encompass nuclear war, while painted posters emerged on main streets showing rockets raining down on Washington, DC. The state news agency, KCNA, issued daily reports emphasising what is a pattern of the propaganda: that the regime's belligerence is in response to dire threats from outside, such as the deployment of American B-2 stealth bombers and F-22 fighters as part of joint exercises by American and South Korean armed forces south of the heavily fortified demilitarised zone (DMZ). To its people, North Korea is painted as victim, not aggressor. On March 31st the regime described the country's nuclear weapons (still few and crude) as the nation's "life" that would never be abandoned while outside forces threatened it with nuclear attack.



Yet for a solipsistic society force-fed on the fear of nuclear annihilation, the few signs that the capital was on anywhere near a war footing appeared more comical than convincing—like a version of “Dad’s Army” in totalitarian drag. Buses and trams got up in camouflage looked as if they were wearing hairnets with the odd leaf stuck on. Locals chuckled when a foreigner warned facetiously that if they blended in any better, other vehicles might

crash into them.

North Korea is the most highly militarised society on earth. Yet in the capital the only guns on view were wooden ones, carried by some callow-looking cadets. The heaviest concentration of soldiers was on the road from Pyongyang’s airport (no military planes visible): hundreds of conscripts, shovels in hand, were digging up a park and planting trees. Work brigades thronged the capital, busy on grass verges planting spring flowers.

In Pyongyang it was hard to escape the impression that the threats and bluster aimed at America and the South were mainly for domestic consumption. They seemed intended to present Kim Jong Un, the young dictator, as a fearless commander-in-chief. External threats justify North Korea’s paranoia and enforced isolation, whatever hardships are imposed on its people. And it provides existential drama to a nation used to mind-numbing, wall-to-wall Kim worship as entertainment.

There is something of an end-of-the-world cult to it all. In conversation, people talk of Mr Kim, his father and his grandfather in hushed, revered tones. Mr Kim’s decision to build roller-skating parks for the capital’s pampered children is narrated ecstatically. There is rather less talk of the fact that one in four North Korean children (nearly all in the provinces) is stunted from malnutrition.

Theatre of the absurd

Along the Taedong river winding through Pyongyang, revolutionary music wafts across at every turn, providing what sounds like a soundtrack to an epic death-or-glory film. At sunrise, a piercing soprano belts out from a sound van. The song is about seizing victory “in one breath”—an exhortation to speed that is also written on the wall of the new 20-storey central bank, whose construction beside the river seems to have slowed.

Curiously, some of the privileged residents of Pyongyang continue to lap the propaganda up. People gape at television reruns of the late dictator, the paunchy, awkward Kim Jong Il, visiting hospitals and factories—though they must have watched clips of these inspections countless times before.

The distracted mood in Pyongyang may not persist elsewhere. It is thought that three-quarters of North Korea's 1.1m troops are stationed within 60 miles (100km) of the DMZ, with reportedly 10,000 artillery pieces capable of hitting Seoul. Yet South Korean and American intelligence suggests no unusual troop movements.

It is perhaps economic consequences which cause most worry in Pyongyang. Since North Korea sent a satellite-bearing rocket into orbit in December, the currency has weakened on the black market by a tenth, to about 8,000 won to the dollar. The official rate stands at 100 won to the dollar. A good public-service job pays about 3,000 won a month, which is less than 50 American cents at the unofficial exchange rate.

Yet the swanky bars and coffee shops that foreign tourists frequent are full of uniformed North Koreans. It suggests that the more the exchange rate weakens, the more a privileged elite with access to hard currency benefits.

International sanctions, tightened after North Korea's nuclear test in February, cause worry for some Pyongyang residents. The sanctions, they fret, may put off hard-currency investment in North Korea, which growing numbers of state-backed businesses are seeking.

Possibly the weakest point for the regime, and a potential restraint on its belligerence, is the glaring lack of mechanisation in the economy. In the capital and the surrounding countryside, it is sheer manpower, rather than machines or fuel, that appears to keep the economy going. As teams of farmers, men and women, broke the icy winter soil for planting, not a tractor was running. On one rutted road, a Porsche, probably driven by a foreign investor in North Korea, raced past old men and women in peasant gear pushing handcarts laden with sacks of seed uphill. The most evident form of free-market enterprise appeared to be the old men sitting by the roadside with kits to mend punctured bicycle tyres.

While throngs walked from one town to the next, Pyongyang was visible in the distance. Unlike most capital cities, it was not enveloped in smog—for the big factories appear to run slowly, when they run at all. Instead, gleaming on the horizon was the futuristic, 105-storey Ryugyong Hotel, shaped like a thrusting dagger. It, too, does not work, for there is no money to complete it. From a Porsche, it must make for a stirring sight. For anyone pushing bent-backed behind their handcarts, in any normal country it would feel like merciless mockery.