

Japanese school history texts still incorrectly dismiss many Japanese war crimes as myths, including major atrocities such as the Rape of Nanking and Japanese biological warfare experiments on Chinese prisoners. The texts also do not cover Japanese mistreatment of Australian (and allied) prisoners of war in anywhere near appropriate detail. Many young Japanese tourists visiting Australia are consequently surprised to discover that Japan attacked Australia during World War II.

That said, however, it seems unlikely that Japan will again pose a military threat to Australasia. Like Australia, Japan is now a major ally of the United States and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Japanese governance is also fairly democratic by international standards. Furthermore, free-trade agreements and general peace guarantee access to raw materials a lot easier and cheaper than conquest. The becalmed Japanese economy suffering from prolonged deflation also acts as a firm brake on substantial Japanese rearmament and a recurrence of a foreign policy driven by sabre rattling.

While nations have only enduring interests rather than enduring friends, a potential threat from Japan also remains unlikely for even more prosaic reasons. The modern, joint-focused ADF, and the Australian population at large, are surely most unlikely to again embrace a modern version of the 'Singapore strategy'. Such a disastrous strategy was foisted on us in the late 1920s and 1930s by narrow-minded civilian bureaucrats in the Department of Defence and complacent politicians unwilling to pay for effective national defence. It couldn't possibly happen again could it?

The eccentricity of hermits

The hermit kingdom of North Korea continues to provide the epilogue of the Cold War. While there appears to be no rational reason for a war to break out, especially from our viewpoint, the biggest problem remains in understanding how the North Korean regime views its international and domestic predicaments, and in how it might react.

North Korea remains an enigma wrapped in a riddle governed by what we think is a joke (individually and ideologically). At least superficially, the North Korean State could be described as a 'would-be Roman Empire' celebrated in bronze instead of marble. Even more than their North Asian neighbours, the North Koreans appear to value the oriental game of 'Go' in strategy formulation. Put simply, they do not always share our predilection for linear logic and therefore often appear unpredictable within our frames of reference.

Throughout the Cold War, North Korea was occasionally a worry but not a significant threat outside the Korean peninsula. In a similar manner to Iraq, the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and consequent regional instability has fundamentally changed the equation. Recently there has been an upsurge in the

numbers and seniority of North Korean defectors. As well as providing further evidence of the regime's unravelling, these defector reports apparently indicate that the concept of 'regime change' and the recent collective intervention in Iraq have concentrated the minds of the North Korean leadership. No doubt the example of the 'decapitation strikes' launched against the Iraqi leadership at the beginning of the intervention in Iraq has not assuaged their concerns. Accurate assessments of the real North Korean reaction are still being compiled but more than mild paranoia appears to be endemic.

For Australia, the detention of the North Korean ship Pong Su for alleged smuggling of illegal narcotics with official blessing simply adds another unwanted layer of complexity. As a signatory to the 1953 Korean armistice Australia is legally, morally and strategically bound to assist South Korea and the US should North Korea initiate hostilities again. Our ability to assist is limited, but no doubt some contingency planning is occurring for air and maritime options.

The biggest problem with the North Korean regime is not so much in determining when its inevitable collapse will occur. The key dilemma remains in assessing what its leaders understand to be their situation, and what they might resort to in attempting to avoid or survive the regime's death throes (if they can recognise them). Furthermore, the paranoid nature of North Korea's totalitarian regime and its tendency to strategic brinkmanship provide obvious limitations to dialogue and crisis management through conventional diplomacy.

The death throes of communist dictatorships thus far have not followed a uniform pattern and the Asian versions have, as yet, all survived. The Soviet juggernaut slowly bogged down in internal corruption of all types until it eventually tottered to a complete stop. The externally imposed communist dictatorships in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Bulgaria crumbled quickly when their ruling cliques realised the game was up. The unwilling communist federation of Yugoslavia crumbled through a mix of secessionist and democratic pressures, but not without a decade of war provoked by Serbian communists trying to prolong the inevitable. In only one case, Ceausescu's Romania, probably the closest equivalent personality cult to North Korea, did the ruling clique attempt to repress widespread popular dissent and thereby trigger a violent confrontation that it swiftly lost.

No one outside North Korea really knows what effect the half-century of cradle-to-grave, all-pervasive propaganda and mystical twaddle about the two Kims has really had on most North Koreans. It may have, even if only subconsciously so far, nurtured the type of underground cynicism and desperation that only awaits the right trigger as in Romania. On the other hand, the North Korean people may be as broken in spirit as many Iraqis.

Using a first principles argument, it seems a simple question of undertaking a cost–benefit analysis to determine whether North Korea should exist or not. If it should but will still collapse eventually, is it better to continue propping it up, or to actively manage its collapse, or to just let it fail? The chances of agreement on this issue being easily reached between China, the US, South Korea, Japan and Russia are not good. The chances of North Korea agreeing as well are virtually nil. The dilemma for the outside world really remains whether we can risk waiting for an internal collapse in North Korea with all its attendant risks from a disintegrating regime lashing out first in desperation, or whether further external coercion or even direct intervention might bring a better result. North Korean threats of nuclear and conventional ‘retaliation’, and the somewhat ambiguous situation and position of China further complicate the issue.

The only country that can really make the call on whether ‘wait and see’ is still an option is South Korea because it would have to bear the brunt of the risks and consequences either way. Even if war is avoided, there are clear signs that some South Korean leaders are becoming somewhat traumatised at the prospect of Korean reunification. South Korea has studied the lessons of German reunification with great interest and rocketing concern. If the huge and strong West German economy could be so damaged by absorbing the most successful of the communist economies, South Korea naturally fears having to absorb probably the worst of them. While South Korea is the world’s 13th largest economy, North Korea’s is less than half that of Bangladesh. On top of this are the simple facts that the North is starving and its people are deeply traumatised psychologically by their long inundation in lunatic political, social and economic conditions. The only silver lining for South Korea, and it would be a two-edged sword, is that it might inherit a nuclear-weapons capability without the international odium of developing one.

While the world ponders these dilemmas, Japan and South Korea grow ever more nervous and North Korea’s leaders probably ever more paranoid. The benighted people of North Korea also continue to endure mass starvation, extensive and comprehensive repression, and the scary prospect of being sacrificed even more to the vanity and paranoia of their self-styled ‘dear leader’.

A firm base for an argument

Kites appear to be floating again in the sky of Australian public debate concerning possible basing of US forces in Australian territory. One impetus for renewed interest in such an option appears to be increased US desires to significantly reduce their large forward deployments in South Korea and Japan (principally Okinawa). Australian Ministers and senior US officials have denied that there is any serious US interest in long-term basing in Australia for large forces.

Discussion of this issue needs to be kept in perspective. For example, only one US carrier battle group is homeported outside the United States (in Japan) and US ground-force deployments are rarely substantial away from traditional ‘front line’ confrontations. The constraints of Australian geography, especially the distance to traditional ‘front lines’ in the Middle East and North Asia, will always limit the potential attractiveness of Australian facilities for large-scale US forces on a permanent basis. Despite some media speculation, the campaign against transnational terror in South East Asia does not require the forward basing of large US forces closer to the region.

Furthermore, and in our strategic and ADF interoperability interests, US forces have been exercising in Australia, either jointly or on their own, for decades — often for months at a time. Elements of the US military, especially the Marine Corps, have been interested in even greater training access to Australian facilities for many years. There are often more USMC (and Singaporean) fighters exercising from RAAF Darwin than Australian ones. The USMC have also often expressed interest in accessing ADF field training areas such as the much under-utilised (and difficult to access) Yampi Sound Training Area in the Kimberleys.

There is often much interest at State level in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia in hosting more US forces on either a temporary or permanent basis. While it is unlikely that large US forces might be based in Australia permanently, there are no insurmountable obstacles to more US forces in principle. A degree of knee-jerk anti-Americanism from some sections of the community cannot be discounted but can be appropriately placated or ignored. To put this in perspective, how many Australians are aware that Singapore maintains permanent and extensive air force training facilities in Perth?

Some Australian journalists and pressure groups can be expected to blow this issue out of all proportion in order to satisfy latent or blatant anti-American prejudices, or to provoke a reaction among Australia’s neighbours in order to get a ‘story’ or some publicity respectively. Some might even scratch both itches. Even without such gratuitous beatings of the regional bushes the reaction of Australia’s neighbours to any increase in US use of Australian facilities would need watching. Their reaction, however, poses few real obstacles if managed correctly. The US already has access to facilities in Singapore and this is viewed at a good thing for regional stability. Thailand and the Philippines are not likely to object as both have formal and informal alliances with the US, including regular joint exercises with US forces. Some elements in Malaysia and Indonesia might choose to view such increased US use in a bad light but most will not — at least in private. More to the point, the anti-Western bigotry that would motivate some Malaysian and Indonesian critics is inevitable no matter what Australia and the US freely choose to do. Growing US impatience with such posturing, in suitable diplomatic phrasing, was