

Kim Jong-un dances to dangerous tune

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Arriving shortly after the North Korean People's Army abandoned a 60-year-old armistice agreement with the South, I found rollerblades throughout the streets of Pyongyang and a population humming theme songs from US movies. While the outside world judges the credibility of North Korea's war threats, in Pyongyang there are few signs of elevated tension. Kim Jong-un's bellicose rhetoric masks a country where creeping change and internal pressures are threatening the Kim dynasty's strength.

Amid ultimatums to the US military, North Koreans are bopping to the Rocky theme song performed by Moranbong, a new band of 16 women in sexy military uniforms. If North Korea had a billboard chart, let alone voting, Moranbong would take out the top 10 spots. Their success is due to the sponsorship of new leader Kim Jong-un and their repertoire of Hollywood theme songs and Disney tunes seems closely tailored to the leader's tastes.

In the streets of privileged Pyongyang, North Korean children have at last discovered rollerblades. On North Korean TV, military hardware and party faithful parade through Kim Il-sung Square. In real life, the square is full of whizzing children. My visit has been highly choreographed by local government guides so I see what they want me to see, but I don't see a country seriously preparing itself for all-out war.

My travel companion, a Tokyo-based advertising executive, thinks the Kim dynasty is the most successful brand he has ever seen. It is predicated on stoicism and unity in the face of external military threats and the personality cult of former leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Kim Jong-un must now freshen the family brand to include his own image.

This will be much more difficult for him than it was for his father. Kim Jong-il had 14 years to learn the family business before he took power whereas Kim Jong-un had only a year's training. The control of propaganda and information that his father enjoyed is rapidly diminishing for Kim Jong-un. In the first year of his reign, mobile phone subscribers in North Korea increased from 950,000 to 1.7 million. Citizens can't access the internet or call overseas, but they can pass information more quickly within North Korea. More information is trickling in about the outside world. All of this gnaws at the regime's total control of what North Koreans see and hear.

A North Korean consumer culture has been spurred by the manufacturing revolution in China. In Pyongyang there are signs of a timid transition to a market economy. Beside propaganda billboards papered across the city are advertisements for cars. Near the North Korean Parliament building, which this week appointed economic reformer Pak Pong-ju as Premier, a new shopping centre rises. By Kim Il-sung Square, a joint venture Austrian coffee house company serves lattes to those with hard currency. Like their Swiss-schooled leader, North Koreans elites have caught a whiff of the finer things in life and are hungry for more.

In North Korea's increasingly deforested countryside workers on collective farms are simply hungry. The price of rice has doubled in the past year and prehistoric agricultural methods limit productivity. Chinese-style agricultural reform is rumoured, but will be difficult. The last major North Korean reform, a currency revaluation in 2009, was disastrously executed. Everywhere I go there are signs of burgeoning black markets.

Kim Jong-un is aware of the cost of isolation from the outside world, and must keenly feel the creeping pressures upon the economy and regime. If he is to reform, he first needs credit with conservative military hardliners and party senior officials who might disapprove of his penchant for US movies and basketball. A victory over the US military, whether real or manufactured, might go a long way to firming his grip on power.

There are plenty of risks in this brinksmanship. The new government in Seoul, elected by South Koreans who suffered the indignity of the Cheonan incident and who increasingly demand their own

nuclear weapons, could over-react to provocation. The inexperienced Kim Jong-un might miscalculate his efforts. Or Jong-un's gambit might fail to placate his opponents, perpetuating regime instability in a country that now has crude nuclear weapons. The US will not want to reward North Korea for its ready-made crisis and will adopt a harder line.

On New Year's Eve, Moranbong played a concert for Kim Jong-un to celebrate North Korea's first successful satellite launch. Party and military elite watched rocket launches and missile trajectories projected behind the musicians. In an Asia fraught with festering nationalism and strategic uncertainty, the leader of the region's most anti-US regime welcomed 2013 with a stage full of Disney characters and the strains of It's A Small World After All.

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