

By Invitation

How the Western media gets the Korean crisis wrong

It's one more reason for Singaporeans to be wary of Western narrative on Asian issues.



Kishore Mahbubani

For The Straits Times

Is the Singaporean mind Eastern or Western? This is obviously an existential question that Singapore has to grapple with. Yet there is amazingly little discussion of it.

The big danger that Singapore faces is that if the Singaporean mind remains primarily Westernised, it will miss out on the big Asian century coming our way. Since the Western (especially Anglo-Saxon) narrative is so dominant and so seductive, we get easily taken in by it.

Let me illustrate this point with a pressing contemporary issue: North Korea. The Western media provides a simple black (North Korea) and white (Western) portrayal of the issue. Most Singaporeans probably have bought into this simple black-and-white view. In so doing, they fail to understand that the North Korean issue is more complex and nuanced.

The North Korean regime is certainly behaving erratically, conducting nuclear and missile tests. It also makes horrifying statements. In a March 2017 statement, North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said: "The Korean People's Army will reduce the bases of aggression and provocation to ashes with its invincible Hwasong rockets tipped with nuclear warheads."

Paradoxically while the North Korean regime is behaving

erratically, it is not behaving irrationally. It can bluster about war because it knows that everyone knows that war is not an option for the Korean peninsula.

Why not? If war is imminent, 10 million South Koreans would have started evacuating Seoul. Forget nuclear weapons. Seoul is only 56km from the North Korean border. The North Koreans have assembled thousands of artillery pieces which are pointing at Seoul. In one day, they could kill millions. Anyone who wants to start a war on the Korean peninsula must know that the cost is too high.

Unless you are prepared to sacrifice the 10 million citizens of Seoul, war is not an option. This is why it is irresponsible to suggest that war is a possible solution.

Sadly, some respectable commentators have done so.

Peter Apps, Reuters global affairs columnist, wrote that military action might provoke disaster but that non-action might be blamed for a worse future conflict. He said: "Over the last few years, US and South Korean forces have shifted their focus from training to stop a North Korean offensive to having plans in place for a comprehensive invasion across the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). That would be a major undertaking, one that would dwarf any war America – or any other country – has fought in recent history."

NBC News reported (incorrectly): "The US is prepared to launch a pre-emptive strike with conventional weapons against North Korea should officials become convinced that North Korea is about to follow through with a nuclear weapons test."

Writing in *The Straits Times* on April 15 this year, Jonathan Eyal said: "For the reality is that, far from being unthinkable, there are a variety of

practical ways military force can be deployed to coerce North Korea; far from being irresponsible or 'culpable', the current US administration is acting with foresight by testing these options."

Unlike the others who advocated military action, Eyal advocated a military build-up to squeeze Pyongyang. However, it is naive to believe that a military build-up can squeeze Pyongyang. Pyongyang knows well that neither America nor South Korea will dare to fire the first shot. The consequences will be horrendous.

AMERICA'S CONFUSED GOALS

The decision to deploy the US aircraft carrier group led by USS Carl Vinson is therefore an empty gesture. It will not make the North Korean regime scared. Instead, it will convince it that its erratic gestures have been successful because it has learnt from experience that the only way to get America's attention is to make erratic gestures. And when it acts reasonably, no one notices it.

Fortunately, some wise Western voices have begun to speak out and question whether the West also needs to change its strategy towards North Korea. Albert Einstein once wisely said: "No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it."

Journalist and author Fareed Zakaria made the same point in his column when he said: "The United States has had roughly the same strategy towards North Korea for



decades. It is a policy of sanctions, threats, intimidation, pressure and isolation. And it has not worked."

So what would an alternative strategy look like? Fareed Zakaria also recently quoted John Delury, a senior fellow of the Centre on US-China Relations and an Assistant Professor of International Studies at Yonsei University, as saying: "If the United States really hopes to achieve peace on the Korean peninsula, it should stop looking for ways to stifle North

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Korea's economy and undermine Kim Jong Un's regime and start finding ways to make Pyongyang feel more secure. This might sound counterintuitive, given North Korea's nuclear ambitions and human rights record. But consider this: North Korea will start focusing on its prosperity instead of its self-preservation only once it no longer has to worry about its own destruction. And North Korea will consider surrendering its nuclear deterrent only once it feels secure and prosperous and is economically integrated into North-east Asia."

Madam Fu Ying, a former vice-minister for foreign affairs in China and now chairman of the National People's Congress' Foreign Affairs Committee, said: "American rhetoric about North Korea often confuses 'denuclearisation' with 'regime collapse', so much so that North Korea could not tell which one was the main target."

Anglo-Saxon commentators also say or imply that the North Korean problem has persisted because China is not fulfilling its responsibility of pressuring North Korea. Actually it is quite stunning that China has voted for United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions imposing sanctions on North Korea. This would have been inconceivable when I served on the UNSC in 2001-2002.

But China will clearly not bring about a collapse of the North Korean regime because China would suffer a great deal. Millions

of North Korean refugees would flow into China. More dangerously from China's point of view, it would lead to an American military ally sitting on China's border.

A REUNIFIED, PEACEFUL KOREA?

This is why Professor Roderick MacFarquhar has thoughtfully proposed the following: "China could insist that United States military personnel leave a newly united Korean peninsula, and that the united Korea be permanently neutral, like Austria after the withdrawal of Soviet and Western troops in 1955."

The big question therefore is this: Why has no American administration proposed this simple step to assure China?

The North Korean issue is not the only issue where the Singaporean mind gets trapped by the Western narrative. My co-author Jeffery Sng and I produced a book describing Asean as a "miracle". But Western commentators dismiss Asean as a "talkshop".

Let me ask my fellow Singaporeans a simple question: Do you think Asean is a miracle or a talkshop?

If, as is likely, you believe that Asean is a mere talkshop, how do you respond to this simple comparison we made in our book on Asean? Two countries were under military regimes for a long time. One was Syria. The other was Myanmar. The West took care of Syria with bombs, sanctions and threats. Asean took care of Myanmar with engagement and patient dialogue. Indeed, we tell remarkable stories about the engagement with Myanmar in the book. Just ask yourself a simple question: Was the Western approach to Syria better than the Asean method on Myanmar?

Another simple fact shows how remarkable Asean is. The Association of South-east Asian Nations was set up on Aug 8, 1967. Fifty years later, South-east Asia is at peace. Would North-east Asia (including North Korea) be as troubled today if 50 years ago, someone had set up an Association of North-east Asian Nations? In short, the North Korean issue also demonstrates the hidden genius of Asean.

Let me conclude with a simple piece of advice to my fellow Singaporeans. Please be very careful each day you pick up the newspapers to read some Anglo-Saxon media analysis of contemporary problems, like North Korea or Syria, Ukraine or Iran. When you read these analyses, please ask yourselves: Are you reading an objective analysis? Or are you reading a distorted world view?

And if you want proof that the Anglo-Saxon media can be distorted, just do a simple search and see how many Anglo-Saxon commentators have compared Singapore to North Korea in the past. If they can get the Singapore story so wrong, surely they can be equally wrong on other issues. In short, my fellow Singaporeans, please be supremely sceptical of the seductive Western narrative.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. He is the co-author with Jeffery Sng of *The Asean Miracle: A Catalyst For Peace*