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North and South Korea

Rocket man v Bulldozer

SEOUL

A rapid return to the bad old days of lurid insults and apocalyptic threats

JUST a few weeks ago, when the New York Philharmonic performed in Pyongyang, Kim Jong Il's North Korea seemed to want to present a friendly face to the world. Its scowl is back, with a vengeance. On March 27th it expelled all South Korean officials from an inter-Korean industrial complex just north of the shared border. The next day its navy fired elderly ship-based missiles into the sea. This week the government said it needs its "nuclear deterrent" to ensure its survival, and labelled South Korea's president, Lee Myung-bak, a "traitor", not to mention an "anti-North confrontation advocator". North-South relations seem in a tailspin.

North Korea has been working itself up to this hissy fit since the inauguration of the conservative Mr Lee, nicknamed "the Bulldozer", in February. Mr Lee has linked further economic co-operation with North Korea to its keeping its promise to declare all its nuclear programmes to America's satisfaction. North Korea bristles at this.

South Korea's Chosun newspaper has reported that North Korea's MiG fighters have on at least ten occasions since February crossed South Korea's "tactical action line", some 20km (12 miles) north of the border, after which they can be over Seoul in minutes. Chosun also reported that mechanised North Korean army units have been moving towards the border.

South Korea's response to the military

provocations has been muted. The foreign ministry described the missile tests as "routine military exercises". Some in Seoul link North Korea's belligerence to parliamentary elections in the South on April 9th. The North may hope voters will reject Mr Lee's Grand National Party (GNP). It also hopes that by stoking security fears in South Korea it can drive a wedge between it and its American ally. Those fears might encourage Mr Lee to soften his stance in order to avoid worsening tension and risk damaging South Korea's investment climate. Mr Lee was elected on the promise of revitalising the economy.

Mr Lee's critics believe a South Korean government has no option but to co-operate with the North, especially on humanitarian matters such as family reunions or food supplies for malnourished North Koreans. They say Mr Lee is in thrall to GNP hardliners. These are mostly older politicians who scorn the "sunshine policy" towards the North of former presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. A decade of sunshine, they grumble, has cost a fortune in economic assistance to an evil neighbour, without enhancing national security: witness North Korea's successful nuclear test in October 2006.

Still, every South Korean president has to profess support for closer integration and eventual reunification with North Korea. Mr Lee has promised massive econ-

omic assistance and investment if the North gives up its nuclear programme.

That does not seem very likely in the near term. Progress on the six-party deal supposed to lead to the North's denuclearisation has stalled. Few in Seoul hold out hope that North Korea will make a proper declaration of its nuclear programmes, including its secret uranium-enrichment activities. It was supposed to deliver this by the end of 2007. On April 2nd Christopher Hill, the American negotiator on the issue, said in Seoul that he was "very concerned" by the lack of progress.

The opening of diplomatic relations between America and the North looks increasingly unlikely. Nor does the Bush administration seem willing to remove the North from the list of nations that sponsor terrorism. For its part, Kim Jong Il's regime seems to be biding its time until it can deal with a new American president.

As inter-Korean relations deteriorate, so do prospects for investment by South Korean firms in the North. Optimists had hoped that this might help open the country and hasten political change. But South Korean shipbuilders, for example, who had been exploring setting up shipyards in the North, have shelved such plans.

In the meantime many in South Korea expect mounting tension on the border. North Korea is expected to conduct further provocative military exercises near the demilitarised zone and the maritime "northern limit line", which it wants moved further south. Some in Seoul predict naval clashes. One gloomy North Korea expert who has Mr Lee's ear expects North Korea to restart its nuclear-weapons programme and perhaps conduct another test this year. Even if he is wrong about that, few dispute his view that "a very tough time" looms on the peninsula. ■