

Their word is not enough



HAVING a sound military strategy against North Korea has rarely seemed more important. Unfortunately, “OPLAN 5027”—the main American-South Korean war plan—has been compromised. Last week, South Korea’s intelligence agency arrested one of its own former agents, a two-star army general, for handing over classified information. Apparently the ex-spy—identified only as “Mr Park”—was recruited by North Korean agents while living in China. Mr Park is charged with using his connections in the army to collect top-secret information, including field manuals and troop deployments, which he then turned over to the North.

The country has been in a sort of shock since the sinking of a South Korean warship, the Cheonan, on March 26th. But the Chosun Ilbo, the South’s most widely read newspaper, quoted an officer who described this breach as being even more damaging. The defence ministry is trying to gauge the extent of the leak. It is resigned to having to alter parts of OPLAN 5027.

This is not the first time that the plan has been exposed. Last December North Korean hackers caught a glimpse of the plan thanks to a slip on the part of a South Korean officer. For all their ideological differences, the linguistic and ethnic homogeneity of the Koreas has always rendered each vulnerable to spying by the other. A especially striking number of high-profile cases of espionage have come to light in recent months. In late March, South Korean authorities arrested two would-be assassins who had come for Hwang Jang-yop, the highest-ranking official to have defected from the North. Other cases include that of Kim Soon-nyeo, a Mata Hari-like spy who obtained information about the South’s police and transport system from her lovers, and a Mr Kim who worked in China hunting North Korean defectors and keeping tabs on South Korean intelligence agents.

This spate of busted spies is breeding paranoia in South Korea. Some citizens have come to expect the use of scare tactics by conservative governments—especially when elections draw near. Mr Park of the OPLAN 5027, it so happens, was once involved in an attempt to discredit Kim Dae-jung as a North Korean spy. Mr Kim, soon to become President Kim, was a political liberal on the eve of his election in 1997.

On May 20th an international inquiry delivered its case for concluding that the Cheonan was sunk by a North Korean torpedo attack. Lee Myung-bak, the country’s conservative president, followed with a sombre address to the country. Ever since, South Korea’s hyperactive blogosphere has been churning out conspiracy theories by the dozen. To some, the inquiry’s conclusion and Mr Lee’s speech smelled fishy—as if they were timed to coincide with local elections.

Sceptical bloggers have named the North Korean scare “the northern wind”. Even if it were somehow a fabrication engineered for domestic political ends, it wouldn't have counted as much of a success. Mr Lee's party fluffed last week's elections, losing the majority they held among municipal seats.

Not that South Korea's conspiracy theorists comprise a voting majority. According to a recent poll, 72% trust the government's conclusion that North Korea was behind the Cheonan's sinking. That leaves a large remainder of the population unhappy with the government-led investigation. Their grumbling—often given voice by the opposition parties—has to do with the government's having provided only incomplete information and its refusal to admit the investigative team that North Korea offered to send. Compared with the nearly-unanimous praise that Mr Lee has won from abroad for his handling of the crisis, his inability to convince more his own countrymen is puzzling.

The government is now trying to shore up credibility. In an unprecedented move, the defence ministry has invited popular bloggers, reporters from student-run media and a selection of Twitter-followers to view the wreckage of the Cheonan and to talk with a panel of experts on June 8th. If it botches this explanation, the rumour mills will continue to spin.

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