

Marketing strategy behind posing

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The Sydney Morning Herald

8 April 2013

P. 24

On the day I was in a truck bouncing down the Reunification Highway between Pyongyang and Panmunjon, Kim Jong-un met with munitions factory managers, demanding they "absolutely guarantee the quality of our artillery and shells to ensure a rapid pre-emptive attack on our enemies". A week earlier, he had visited the artillery commanders of the Fourth Army Corps of the Korean People's Army, directing them to reduce nearby South Korean islands to ashes "with a merciless shower of fire". But in the midst of war preparations, North Korea's leader found time to watch an archery team practice and to inspect a new fishery farm.

Two weeks later and the threatened nuclear war has yet to materialise. But for four months now, North Korea's young leader has walked the fine line between building support among his generals and not accidentally starting a war with the US that would destroy North Korea's economy and his family's grip on power.

Keeping the leaders of North Korea's 1.2 million-strong army content is no easy task. Korea's generals have business interests and a taste for the finer things in life. Kim Jong-un reportedly pays his four-star generals \$US1200 (\$1165) a month, on a sort of debit card, which can be used in the few elite shops and restaurants to be found around Pyongyang. That kind of money goes a long way in a country where the average government worker takes home \$2 a month. Luxury four-wheel drives with military plates were lined up outside a pizza restaurant I visited on the banks of the Daedong River. On the outside electricity cuts meant few buildings have regular lighting or lifts. Inside this restaurant, chandeliers and flashing LEDs abound and brightly coloured Italian homewares are available for purchase. But the ultimate status symbol in a country where most can't afford to feed themselves is a pet. On my Air China flight arriving into Pyongyang, two purebred dogs were unloaded and bundled into military vehicles. Luxury pets are yet to join the list of goods banned by United Nations sanctions.

On New Year's Eve, Kim Jong-un promised his people that this year North Korea would become a "thriving socialist country" and an "economic superpower". Obstructing this economic development, though, is the military, which consumes almost a quarter of North Korea's meagre gross domestic product. At last week's Supreme Peoples' Assembly, an economic reformer was promoted to the top post of Premier and two military leaders - the Chief of the Korean KPA General Staff and Minister of the People's Armed Forces had their positions in the politburo downgraded. A subtle shift in political power away from the military may well be under way. And a carefully planned military confrontation with the US is the marketing plan by which Kim can convince his military that he is still on their side.

It also helps to market Kim as a strong and decisive leader. I travelled around North Korea with an advertising executive who says the Kim family dynasty is the most successful brand he has ever seen - on message, on all channels, all of the time. The country staggers under the weight of billboards and portraits profiling Kim's father and grandfather and celebrating their heroism and compassion. Kim has made three times as many public appearances in the first years of his reign than his father did, part of a campaign to insert himself into the family brand. The past weeks have given enough stock footage of the young leader visiting military bases and forming strategy to keep North Korean propaganda in business for the rest of the year. During my visit, my two constantly present government guides kept asking me why Australia was participating in the provocative "Key Resolve" military exercises in South Korea, and why we were a puppet of the US. As with all good propaganda, there is a kernel of truth in their claim. The Australian Defence Force has 15 personnel involved in the cyber-warfare aspects of the US military exercises. More importantly, though, the US military major general commanding the entire US exercise is an Australian. Major General Rick Burr, recently seconded as the Deputy Commanding General of US Army Pacific Command, oversees all ground operations and exercises within the US Pacific Command area of operations. In the Korean theatre, this means the American planning contingencies for a war with North Korea is wearing an Australian uniform.

The US has been executing plans of its own too, mixing restraint with the limited displays of force necessary to reassure the South Koreans. Importantly, it has given North Korea no excuse to strike. The crisis could end with an intervention by China to close the border with North Korea and cease trade of fuel and manufactured goods, but this seems unlikely given the slow-moving intricacies of Chinese foreign policy formulation.

The most likely outcome is that Kim Jong-un judges he has shown enough mettle during this round of tensions, and allows them to dissipate, most likely before April 25. As in Australia, April 25 is the Korean People's Army's most sacred day. And a war they don't really want would spoil their celebratory parades.

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Paul Sheehan is on leave.

James Brown, military fellow for the Lowy Institute for International Policy, recently returned from a visit to North Korea