

THE KOREAS

No penalty shootout

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER

"EVENTS, dear boy. Events". Thus spoke former British prime minister Harold Macmillan, asked what was his biggest problem. As for politicians, so for us humble hacks. You think you've got the story, grasped the basic trend - and then, bam. Something happens, and everything changes. Back to the drawing board.

Take last weekend's events. Shootout in Korea? Soccer might be your first thought, after the co-host's amazing run. Not this time. On Saturday, just hours before South Korea's final match for third place, a 20-minute firefight in the Yellow Sea (West Sea, to Koreans) sank a South Korean patrol boat, killing five and wounding 19. The South returned fire, and then some: it reckons 30 Northern dead and 70 wounded.

So what happened, and why? As ever, there are rival versions: each side says the other shot first. Time was when you wouldn't trust either of them, but not now. North Korea, of course, denies everything, on principle and in Bart Simpson fashion: didn't do it/nobody saw me/can't prove a thing. Why, they even still disavow starting the Korean War (yet they celebrate the day, June 25, as a big victory over the US imperialists), even though the now open Soviet archives prove beyond doubt that the Korean People's Army (KPA) struck first.

Besides, the North's swift advance in 1950

implies an enemy taken by surprise. Ditto on Saturday. That the ROK (Republic of Korea) boat took a direct hit to its steering room suggests premeditation, and no warning. The North's aging armor would be lucky to score so in the heat of battle. It certainly didn't, last time this occurred in 1999, when a fierce Southern counterblast sank one KPA boat, crippled three, and killed up to 80.

Still, presumption isn't proof. In 1999 the South had video evidence. Though equally unexpected, the North fired while its boats were being rammed in a standoff in disputed waters rich in blue crab. Then as now the fishing season was in full swing, and as usual Northern boats were testing Southern waters.

Usually there's a ritual to these encounters. Obviously a sea border is unmarked, and the South tolerates minor infractions. On June 20 it returned a Northern boat and two barges caught 35 miles south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), on which more below. A day earlier, the ROK joint chiefs of staff even complimented the North for "prevent[ing] unintentional confrontations". If they crossed the line, it was to control their own fishermen - or to chase off Chinese boats. When warned, they retreated promptly.

Was Seoul being lulled into a false sense of security? At all events, last Saturday morning ROK boat PKM 357 thought this was a routine encounter. The crew told the Northern ship to turn round, using signal lights and loudhailers as the rules of engagement

require. To be audible means getting dangerously close: just a kilometer. But no one expected an attack, so no one was filming. US satellite pictures and sigint (signals intelligence) monitoring of KPA radio traffic are now being sought, to settle once and for all who started it.

Meanwhile, consider motive. Why on earth would South Korea pick a fight? Under President Kim Dae-jung, who staked his all on a policy of reconciliation now left in tatters? When the whole nation was celebrating a monster football party? It just doesn't add up. But if not the president, might the ROK military want to torpedo the "Sunshine" policy of reconciliation? Possibly. On land, border incidents have been staged for political reasons: especially just before elections, to scare people into voting conservative. But that was in the bad old days - and without casualties. I haven't seen such a conspiracy theory suggested this time, and it doesn't convince.

Rogue military are more probable on the other side. North Korea isn't as united as it likes to make out. The order to fire could have come at any level, from the boat that did it right up to Kim Jong-il himself and all points in between. In Seoul, they now reckon the 1999 incident arose on the spot, in the heat of the moment. After all, Northern vessels were being rammed. That version was tacitly confirmed at the summit a year later. Then again, who can say if this wasn't just a face-

saving excuse after the fact?

As to who was in whose waters, that's a red herring. True, the North never formally accepted the NLL. But it observed it in practice for 46 years, only declaring it invalid in 1999. Its alternative is a non-starter, taking no account of five ROK-controlled islands near the northern coast, which mean a straight line doesn't cut it. If the North Koreans just wanted to fish, and had asked, Kim Dae-jung would surely have agreed.

But someone in Pyongyang preferred to shoot. Who, and why? KPA top brass, with a lot to lose from an outbreak of peace? Or a petulant leader in his palace: watching the on- and off-pitch action south of the border on the latest Japanese wide-screen TV, and grinding his teeth at how well it all went for the enemy? Worse still, he could have had a piece of it all too - for free. But he chose to spurn Seoul and offers from soccer's world governing powers, staging a rival mass display instead - and nobody came. Bad decision. Lousy leadership.

Could the order have gone out: Rain on their parade? Wipe that smile off their faces? Cut 'em down to size? Nothing too risky, mind. Just a nasty nip on the ankle to remind them we're still here. A perverse way to get attention, but in character. Outside the tent by choice, pissing in: that's North Korea, all over.

Courtesy: Asia Times Online

JAPAN

After the games, it's business as usual

MONZURUL HUQ *writes from Tokyo*

THE GREAT enthusiasm surrounding the World Cup never reached that high in Japan as it is usually seen in many other countries. The whole show was rather a reflection of the way Japanese like to perform their duty - not with any overt outburst of emotion, but quietly with precise perfection. The award giving ceremony with its innovative ideas and glittering display was a stark reminder of that fact. Those who were lucky enough to get hold of tickets to watch the final at the stadium had a vague idea of things planned for the closing ceremony, and few expected it to be a show of utmost beauty mixed with supreme harmony. The concluding show indeed had compensated much for an otherwise relatively dull final, where two unexpected contenders somehow failed to display the optimum beauty of a game that the great Argentine of the football world, Diego Maradona, once proudly proclaimed as the king of all sports.

Now with the World Cup over, the two co-hosts of the competition rightfully deserves praise for organizing the championship in a manner fitted to the fame of football itself. In Japan there was not a single incident of football related hooliganism during the month-long event. In addition, the number of arrests that the police agency reported during the competition in connection with soccer related crimes was also significantly lower than any other previous World Cup finals. Only 38 foreigners were detained in Japan on suspected football-related offences of whom the bulk on suspicion of involvement in black marketing of tickets. The government of Japan and country's World Cup organizing committee (JAWOC) must have been feeling a sense of relief after the successful completion of the tournament.

The co-hosts of the competition have other reasons too to feel proud of their achievement. It is the performance of their national teams that had not only ensured their firm footings in the world of competitive football, but also elevated the position of the sporting event much higher within the country and continent Asia. Many Asian countries that until recently were enjoying the beauty of football by watching the performance of European stars on TV screen can now feel proud of emerging new stars near their homes who are no less superior. This indeed is bound to have a long-term impact on the shaping of sporting preferences throughout the continent. Loaded with experiences of organizing football's supreme show on earth, Japan and Korea again are destined to take the lead in this particular field too.

With the departure of the World Cup and returning of teams and officials to their respective destinations, the curtain of the month-long tournament finally came down on 1st July, the day Japan bid farewell to the new champion Brazil and saw the International Media Center in Yokohama folding its physical existence after busy and noisy month-long activities. But despite the end of the show, the country and its people are bound to cherish the sweet memory of the festival of football for quite sometime. And those for whom the game really proved to be a deviation from the otherwise uninteresting routine quite life, the outreach of that memory is destined to go even further. The small village of Nakatsue-mura in the Kyushu island that first came into limelight for its inhabitants' long and nervous wait for the arrival of the national team from Cameroon, is one small example of how even rural Japan got caught-up with the flavor of the World Cup. When Cameroon played its last match against Germany, the mayor of the village along with some other villagers traveled all the way from Kyushu to the venue at Shizuoka to cheer for their honored guests. But all such things by now have taken their rightful place in memories of people and Japan has returned to normal daily life again.

In one of his first official duties after the World Cup, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi met South Korean President Kim Dae Jung in Tokyo on Monday to discuss a range of issues related to bilateral ties as well as situation in East Asia. The two leaders didn't forget to thank each other for successfully co-hosting the game and expressed hope that the experience of co-hosting the World Cup would further strengthen bilateral ties between Japan and South Korea. But beyond football they also had other pressing issues to discuss.



As millions paper cranes fall: a scene after the final at Yokohama Stadium.

As the curtain of the World Cup 2002 was gradually coming down, a naval gun battle in Yellow sea further clouded the future prospect of President Kim's sunshine policy of maintaining dialogue and close contact with North Korea. Being a neighbor and close ally of Seoul, Tokyo kept a close eye on the incident and its fallouts and the first item that the two leaders picked up beyond the World Cup was the seriousness of the matter. Koizumi expressed his concern and extended Tokyo's full support in dealing with the fallout from the incident.

President Kim, on the other hand, informed Japanese premier that despite the gun battle he still plans to pursue his sunshine policy of maintaining dialogue between North and South Korea. The two leaders also expressed their willingness to promote further bilateral exchanges that started with the co-hosting of the World Cup.

As Koizumi's regional diplomatic initiatives are showing signs of maturity and confidence, the picture is far from clear at the home front. The period of month-long World Cup bonanza had also seen rather restrained moves of players from different sectors of Japan's political arena willing to rock the boat of the prime minister who is increasingly losing his popularity. But now as the focus has already shifted from sporting glory to other pressing issues, the call for a cabinet reshuffle is gaining ground within Japan's main ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The prime minister has always insisted that his cabinet ministers should stay in place throughout the tenure of his administration. But now that policy seems to be cracking as his popularity rate is showing a continuous decline in recent days.

A group of LDP elders are now openly calling not only for a cabinet shakeup, but also for changing of guards within the top ranking positions of the party. Foes of Koizumi's reform program within the party showed restraint in criticizing the prime minister as long as he enjoyed massive popular support. But now as Koizumi's candle of popularity dims, the call for a change in his administration and the party is gradually gaining momentum.

The pressure on the prime minister is bound to intensify if economy fails to show any sign of further progress in coming weeks. Meanwhile a weaker dollar is already complicating the efforts of the government to bail out the economy from difficulties. Despite initiatives to intervene the market, monetary agencies in Japan finding it hard to control the surge of the rising yen. The US currency briefly dipped to 118-yen range before hovering back again to around 120. The government and the central bank repeatedly intervened last week, selling yen to shore up the dollar. A stronger yen hurts Japan's export oriented corporations, which in turn have their fallout on the economic health of the nation.

Any continuation of the situation might further complicate the position of the administration to an extent when Koizumi might find himself left with no other option but to give in to the pressure of his opponents. So, a shake up of the cabinet is likely to be the first of a series of changes that Japan is going to witness during the initial stage of post-World Cup period.

MYANMAR

The moves

The political process in Myanmar must co-opt the ethnic factor for any lasting political arrangement, writes **Paolienlal Haokip**

THE RELEASE of Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the democratic struggle in Myanmar (Burma), from 19 months of house arrest on May 6 was indeed an event of historical significance. The general perception seems to be that the event could be the beginning of the end of military rule, and more importantly, of political conflict in Myanmar. It is also widely perceived to be the outcome of the efforts of the United Nations through its envoy, Razali Ismail, in trying to bring about a national reconciliation within Myanmar. However, things may not be as simple and, without sounding conspiratorial, it could be said that Ms. Suu Kyi's release could well be another of the many aces up the sleeve of the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council).

A close look at Ms. Suu Kyi's release may reveal more disappointments than hope for the realisation of the twin ideals of democracy and national reconciliation that Myanmar desperately needs. For one, her release implies that the military Government is confident that a free Ms. Suu Kyi no longer threatens it as in 1992, and that talks can now be held under the parameters set by the Junta. This confidence may not be entirely baseless. The Junta has over the years, beginning from the crushing of the

August 8, 1988, democratic uprising, largely succeeded in minimising the political appeal and support base of Ms. Suu Kyi through its rightist propaganda and sermons about the priority of national unity over democracy. It has also managed to divide the main opposition National League for Democracy, led by Ms. Suu Kyi, and the ethnic nationalities by taking advantage of the fact that the two have different priorities. Restoration of democracy is topmost on the NLD agenda, and, for this reason, the party has been tactfully avoiding the signing of a Panglong-type pact (a pre-independence agreement signed in 1947 between the ethnic groups and Aung San, Ms. Suu Kyi's father, which provided for some ethnic national groups to have the option of seceding from Burma 10 years after the country's independence or to have liberal packages of autonomy) with the ethnic groups saying the nationalities' question can and should be addressed only after democracy is restored. On the other hand, comprehensive autonomy, if not independence, comes first for the ethnic groups. Democracy for them does not necessarily spell self-determination or autonomy the ideals for which a majority of them had taken up arms decades ago. The military Junta, by negotiating ceasefire agreements and promis-

ing the ethnic groups state autonomy under the new Constitution drafted by it, has, to a certain extent, neutralised their support for the democratic movement and has been able to minimise armed engagements with them, which had cost both sides heavily in the past. The struggle for the restoration of democracy would have had better prospects with the involvement of the ethnic groups. The release of Ms. Suu Kyi has also to be seen in the context of the Junta's desperation for legitimacy, internationally as well as inside the country. The move is aimed at gaining some international acceptability, which could result in the easing of economic sanctions against the regime. Internally, it could help buy time for the military to complete its future designs for a permanent say in the governance of the country. This means that any democratic Government emerging out of the talks has to be a compromised one. Given these facts, the prospects of the restoration of democracy do not seem to have taken a giant leap with the release of Ms. Suu Kyi and some of her colleagues in the NLD. However, the release did signal a progression from the earlier deadlock between the SPDC and the NLD. Political stability through national reconciliation, rather than the issue of democracy restoration, needs to

be seen as the core issue in addressing a lasting solution for the political turmoil in Myanmar. The dominant-periphery conflict is a much more vexed issue than is often held to be. Unless a lasting remedy for this problem is devised, democratisation of the polity alone is not likely to end Myanmar's search for peace and political harmony. In this regard, it may be contended that the militarisation of Burma since the 1962 coup was not the outcome of any inherent Burmese dislike for democracy or even the failure of the democratic regime preceding the coup to deliver the goods; but a consequence of the failure of the democratic regime to honour the Panglong agreement which promised optional independence and/or autonomy to the minority national groups such as the Shan, the Mon and the Kachin. The element of rightist Burmese aspirations of domination and the subsequent 'Burmanisation' of the country where the national groups assimilate and reconcile themselves to the dominant group's ideals and interests was foremost in the military's scheme of things.

The international media had been abuzz with the role played by Mr. Razali in facilitating talks between the military and the Leader of the Opposition, but had nothing on his efforts to involve the ethnic nationalities in deciding the future of their country. Five Myanmarese pro-democracy ethnic groups, in a press statement released from Yangon on May 15, called to be included in national reconciliation talks between the military junta and Ms. Suu Kyi. The groups, led by the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD), welcomed the release of Ms. Suu Kyi and stated, "development of national reconciliation will succeed in as much as the tripartite talks are successful". However, there has been no response from the other side. Apparently, that

section of the polity is again being given the go-by when others proceed to decide their destiny. Backdoor consultations with them will not be enough, if that is what is being done. Groups such as the Shan, the Chin, the Karen and the Mon with existing states should be given the opportunity to spell out the measure of autonomy they require and the feasibility of accommodating such demands within a federal polity examined. Besides, there are certain national groups such as the Pa-U, Palaung, Wa, Lahu, and Kuki that are still striving for a state of their own within Myanmar. These groups should also be included in the talks and their demands of territorial states and autonomy within a federal Union considered. More than any other single factor, it was the nationalities' question that engendered the political turmoil in Myanmar. These groups have been the primary victims of human rights violations within Myanmar. The problem of national reconciliation therefore needs to be settled with the full participation of the concerned national groups.

It would not be too late to involve them now. The political process in Myanmar must co-opt the ethnic factor for any lasting political arrangement, whether under a democracy, a quasi-democracy or military rule. The talks should ideally be between the Junta, the NLD and the leaders of the various ethnic groups, supervised and moderated by the U.N. Unless the degree of U.N. intervention is increased and the principle of unity in diversity upheld in the final outcome of the talks, the mistakes of history in Myanmar are bound to be repeated, and this time, with far greater political and economic costs.

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