

## ERIC MARGOLIS



# So close, yet worlds apart

Will North and South Korea, sundered by 30 years of enmity, manage to reconcile their differences? Can 40 million capitalist South Koreans find happiness again with the 17 million Marxists of the North?

Of course, say both sides, it's just a matter of the other doing it our way. In recent years, the two Koreas have carried on fitful peace talks that have frequently ended in some very nasty incidents. Like two Latin lovers, the Koreas seem to be saying, "love me or I will kill you."

On Oct. 8, 1983, North Korea proposed peace talks to the Seoul government. The very next day a huge explosion set by North Korean agents killed 17 senior South Korean cabinet officers and journalists visiting Rangoon, Burma. President Chun Doo Hwan narrowly escaped. Not surprisingly, there were no peace talks.

This year, fall floods ravaged South Korea. The North offered food and relief aid. To everyone's surprise the South accepted. Shortly after, the two sides sat down at the truce village of Panmunjom to discuss trade, cultural contacts and reconciliation. No one was tasteless enough to mention Rangoon.

While North and South Koreans were smiling and exchanging toasts, a Russian defected from North to South Korea across the demilitarized zone (DMZ). With exquisite timing, he sprinted right through Panmunjom. A major gun battle erupted between border guards, leaving three North Koreans and one South Korean dead and one American wounded. Peace talks were broken off.

This sort of talking peace and making war has been going on for decades. South Korea has been the constant victim of North Korean commando and sabotage missions, attempts to murder government leaders and a relentless campaign of subversion.

North Korea's roly-poly Leader for Life, Kim Il Sung, has never been shy about telling the world that he intends to reunify Korea — and by force, if necessary. Backing up this threat, he has recently expanded North Korea's army from 700,000 to one million men, no mean feat for a nation of only 17 million. A good portion of these troops are poised 60 miles north of Seoul along the DMZ.

Kim has skillfully played off his two principal supporters, Russia and China, extracting aid and arms from both while managing to avoid taking sides in the bitter Sino-Soviet dispute. But in the process of turning his nation into a major military power, Kim has also bankrupted North Korea. The solution to this problem, Kim has often stated, lies in absorbing South Korea.

A united Korea would permanently alter the balance of military and economic power in north Asia. Joining North Korea's coal, iron and hydro-electric resources to South Korea's large population and growing industrial might would produce a new economic powerhouse. The united Korean armies would be the third largest in the world.

As in the case of the divided Germanys, few of the Koreas' neighbors really want to see unification take place. A united Korea, like a united Germany, would cause too many unpredictable and possibly unsettling changes in the comfortable existing balance of power. So long as the two Koreas fight each other, they will have no energy to devote to their neighbors.

The Russians, however, may think differently. They have no economic competition with Korea and are eager to see it develop as a strategic threat to both China and Japan. For this reason, they have provided Pyongyang (North Korea's capital) with billions in arms and aid over recent years. Moscow is determined to see U.S. troops and airbases driven out of Korea — duplicating their victory in Vietnam.

Many observers believe that North Korea will continue to alternate between smiles and shooting, conducting a campaign to destabilize the South, promote political dissent against the Seoul regime and generally make trouble. At the right moment — be it insurrection, a coup, or general rioting — North Korea's huge armies could move southward to "liberate their oppressed brother."

Kim has been so far deterred from his lifelong goal by the presence of U.S. forces in Korea. The U.S. has remained studiously ambiguous about its possible use of nuclear weapons to counter just such an attack. Massed North Korean armies would provide an ideal target for low-yield, tactical nuclear weapons.

As a result, Russia has for years mounted a sustained propaganda campaign to remove U.S. forces and nuclear weapons from Korea and from important U.S. rear bases in Japan. So far, thankfully, Moscow has not allowed its unpredictable North Korean ally to obtain such arms, though Pyongyang is said to be striving to develop nuclear weapons.

The great British geopolitician Sir William MacKinder predicted 80 years ago that the Korean Peninsula would become the most strategic position in Asia. Today, an eruption there could easily involve Russia, China, the U.S. and Japan in a regional war. Everyone is aware of this danger but no one quite knows how to manage the hot-tempered Koreans.

Compounding this danger, North Korea's Kim Il Sung has often stated his intent to see unification before his death. Given Kim's advanced age and failing health, it is not inconceivable that the Leader for Life may use his armies in the near future. Even if he does not, North Korea's heir-apparent is Kim's son; and he is also committed to the same goal. Koreans are stubborn people — they are not given to idle pledges.

*(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)*