



“ Orwell's dystopia has arrived in the form of the Champions League

” Rod Liddle

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From The Sunday Times

April 27, 2008

Kim Jong-il builds ‘Thunderbirds’ runway for war in North Korea

An airbase inside a mountain is the latest sign that North Korea, whose links to Syria’s nuclear programme came to light last week, is cranking up its military machine

Michael Sheridan, Far East Correspondent, and Uzi Mahnaimin in Tel Aviv

North Korean military engineers are completing an underground runway beneath a mountain that can protect fighter aircraft from attack until they take off at high speed through the mouth of a tunnel.

The 6,000ft runway is a few minutes’ flying time from the tense front line where the Korean People’s Army faces soldiers from the United States and South Korea.

The project was identified by an air force defector from North Korea and captured on a satellite image by Google Earth, according to reports in the South Korean press last week.

It is one of three underground fighter bases among an elaborate subterranean military infrastructure built to withstand a “shock and awe” assault in the first moments of a war, the defector said.

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The airstrike appears to have convinced North Korea to harden its own defences and to spend more on its military, even as it struggles to cope with a new food shortage that could see millions of its citizens go hungry. In recent days North Korea has ordered its people to be vigilant against “warmongers”.

“The prevailing situation requires the whole party and army and all the people to get fully prepared to go into action,” North Korea’s state media said on Friday.

Although the media unleashed a volley of abuse against the United States and Lee Myungbak, South Korea’s conservative new president, it also said “sincere and constructive” negotiations on nuclear disarmament were in progress, an apparent effort to play off hawks against doves in Washington.

Some diplomats, who are sceptical of the process, say that behind the rhetoric, Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader, may sense that he is a hair’s breadth away from a deal that would leave him with up to 10 nuclear weapons and a security guarantee for his regime.

In Washington, nuclear experts were puzzled by the timing and quality of the evidence released by the Bush administration. Democrats suggested hardliners around Dick Cheney, the vice-president, had forced the issue to try to wreck the talks with Kim.

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US ELECTIONS

One indication is that Christopher Hill, the US State Department negotiator, flew to Singapore for an unusual session with his North Korean counterparts shortly before the United States went public. "There must have been some sort of secret agreement or deal," said Taewoo Kim, of the Korea Institute for Defence Analyses in Seoul.

Last year Hill persuaded the White House that the talks offered a realistic chance to accomplish a peace treaty formally ending the 1950-3 Korean war, in which more than 50,000 Americans died. His critics, such as John Bolton, the former United Nations ambassador, say North Korea has a long recidivist history of selling missiles and unconventional weapons to unstable Middle Eastern regimes such as Syria, Iran and Libya.

Whatever the truth, even by the standards of North Korean politics the atomic intrigue half a world away – with its multinational cast of spies, scientists, diplomats and airmen – makes an exotic story.

The alliance between the two clan dictatorships in Damascus and Pyongyang is more than 35 years old. In another tunnel, this one under Mount Myohang, the North Koreans have kept as a museum piece the Kalashnikov assault rifle and pistols sent as gifts from President Hafez al-Assad of Syria to Kim Il-sung in the early years of their friendship.

Today North Korea and Syria are ruled by the sons of their 20th-century dictators – Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000 and Kim Jong-il took over in 1994. They inherited a hatred of America and a fondness for authoritarian family rule.

Syria possesses the biggest missile arsenal and the largest stockpile of chemical weapons in the Middle East, built up over the past two decades with arms bought from North Korea.

North Korea, which detonated a nuclear device in October 2006, has become pivotal to Syria's plans to enhance and upgrade its weapons.

Syria's liquid-fuelled Scud-C missiles depend on "essential foreign aid and assistance, primarily from North Korean entities", said the CIA in a report to the US Congress in 2004.

Diplomats based in Pyongyang have said they now believe reports that about a dozen Syrian technicians were killed in an explosion and train crash at Ryongchon, North Korea, on April 22, 2004. North Korea blamed a technical mishap, but there were rumours of an assassination attempt on Kim, whose special train had passed through the station en route to China some hours earlier.

No independently verified cause of the disaster was made known. However, teams of military personnel wearing protective suits were seen removing debris from the section of the train in which the Syrians were travelling, according to a detailed report quoting military sources which appeared on May 7, 2004, in the Sankei Shimbun, a Japanese newspaper.

The technicians were said to be from Syria's Centre D'Etudes et de Recherche Scientifique, a body known to be engaged in military technology.

Their bodies were flown home by a Syrian military cargo aircraft which was spotted on May 1, 2004 at Pyongyang. There was speculation among military attachés that the Syrians were transporting unconventional weapons, the paper said at the time. Diplomats said the Sankei Shimbun report was now believed to be accurate.

Last year Jane's Defence Weekly reported that dozens of Iranian engineers and Syrians were killed on July 23 attempting to load a chemical warhead containing the nerve gases VX and sarin onto a Scud missile at a plant in Syria.

The Scuds and warheads are of North Korean design and possibly manufacture. Some analysts think North Korean scientists were helping the Syrians to attach air-burst chemical warheads to the missiles.

Syria possesses more than 100 Scud-C and ScudD missiles which it bought from North Korea in the past 15 years. In the 1990s it added cluster warheads to the Scud-Cs that experts believe are intended for chemical weapons.

Like North Korea, Syria has an extensive chemical weapons programme including sarin, VX and mustard gas, according to researchers at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute in California.

The Scud-C is strategically worrying to Israel because Syria has deployed it with one launcher for every two missiles. The normal



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ratio is one to 10. The conclusion: Syria's missiles are set up for a devastating first strike.

Since 2004 there have been a series of leaks designed to suggest that Syria has renewed its interest in atomic weapons, a claim denied by Damascus.

In December 2006 the Kuwaiti newspaper, Al-Siyasa, quoted European intelligence sources in Brussels as saying that Syria was engaged in an advanced nuclear programme in its northeastern Hasakah province.

It also quoted British security sources as identifying the man heading the programme as Major Maher Assad, brother of the president and commander of the Republican Guard.

Early last year foreign diplomats had noticed an increase in political and military visits between Syria and North Korea. They received reports of Syrian passengers on flights from Beijing to Pyongyang, almost the only air route into the country. They also spotted Middle Eastern businessmen using trains between North Korea and the industrial cities of northeast China.

Then there were clues in the official media. On August 14 Rim Kyongman, the North Korean minister of foreign trade, was in Syria to sign a protocol on "cooperation in trade and science and technology". His delegation held the fifth meeting of a "joint economic committee" with its Syrian counterpart. No details were disclosed.

Initially, the conclusion of diplomats was that the deal involved North Korean ballistic missiles, maintenance for the existing Syrian arsenal and engineering expertise for building silos and bunkers against air attack. Now it is known that Israeli intelligence interpreted the meeting as the last piece in a nuclear jigsaw; a conclusion that Israel shared with President George W Bush.

For years the United States and Israel saw North Korean weapons sales to the Middle East as purely a source of revenue – apart from seafood, minerals and timber, North Korea is impoverished and has little else to sell. The nuclear threat in Syria was also believed to be dormant, as Damascus appeared to rely on a chemical first-strike as an unconventional deterrent.

In a period of detente, the United States and its allies concurred when China sold a 30kw nuclear reactor to Syria in 1998 under international controls.

Then, in 2003, American intelligence officials believe that Syria recruited Iraqi scientists who had fled after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Like other countries in the region, Syria renewed its pursuit of nuclear research.

The calculus changed for good after North Korea tested a nuclear bomb in 2006 and admitted to a plutonium stockpile sufficient for 10 more.

The danger to Israel is multiplied by the triangular relationship between North Korea, Syria and Iran. Syria has served as a conduit for the transport to Iran of an estimated £50m of missile components and technology sent by sea from North Korea to the Syrian port of Tartous, diplomats said.

They say Damascus and Tehran have set up a £125m joint venture to build missiles in Syria with North Korean and Chinese technical help. North Korean military engineers have worked on hardened silos and tunnels for the project near the cities of Hama and Aleppo.

Israel also noted reports from Pyongyang that Syrian and Iranian observers were present at missile test firings by the North Korean military last summer and were given valuable experimental data. Israeli sources said last week that Iran was informed "in every detail" about the nuclear reactor and had sent technicians to the site.

Such was the background against which Israel took its decision to strike. Two signals from the North Koreans in the aftermath showed that the bombs hit home.

On September 10, four days after the raid, Kim sent a personal message of congratulations to Assad on the Syrian dictator's 42nd birthday.

"The excellent friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries are steadily growing stronger even under the complicated international situation," Kim said.

The next day, in a message that went largely unnoticed, the North Koreans condemned the Israeli action as "illegal" and "a very dangerous provocation".

Just days later a top Syrian official, Saeed Elias Daoud, director of the ruling Syrian Arab Ba'ath party, boarded a Russian-made vintage jet belonging to the North Korean airline, Air Koryo, for the short flight from Beijing.

Daoud brought counsel and sympathy from Assad, whose father Hafez was famed as a strategic gambler with a talent for brinkmanship.

Now Kim is waiting to see if his own gamble has paid off.

Additional reporting: Sarah Baxter in Washington

HAVE YOUR SAY

Now as far as smart bombs go don't you need to see the target to guide it in by lazer? Seems to me the arm chair warriors think its a video game.Try to remember in Iraq in 1991 we used dummy bomb's dropped from 5000 feet out of range of their out dated AA guns.Try researching N Korea's def strategy.

cuda, Dane, U.S.A.

So Team America was based on fact?! Well I never...

Thom James, Auckland, NZ

@Chris in Glasgow - But the vast majority of Russia's 22 million killed were 'own goals'!

Scabeng, Jozi, RSA

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