Kim Jong-un Looks Up at the Sky: Another North Korean Threat or a Sunshine from the Milky Way?
by Pier Luigi Zanatta

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The political meaning of Unhasu’s trip has been underscored by some other encouraging signs. The North Korean representative to the Six-Party Talks Ri Yong Ho and his South Korean counterpart Lim Sung-nam met informally at an academic forum in New York earlier this month, while envoys from Washington and Pyongyang resumed talks in Beijing about the American food assistance suspended three years ago. That’s to reciprocate the hopeful start of a new round of strategic negotiations that US and North Korean representatives are having in China after Pyongyang showed a new willingness to stop its uranium enriching activities and to accept IAEA inspections.

It’s all déjà vu. But it’s a première under the new leader of the last Stalinist stronghold in the world, the Swiss-educated Kim Jong-un. Since December he has managed to succeed quite smoothly his late father Kim Jong II, and now he seems to have put an important stake on “musical diplomacy.” Shortly before leaving for France, the Unhasu had a triumphant performance in Pyongyang and Kim Jong Un went personally to cheer the orchestra, accompanied by a large group of dignitaries. Among them, his “political tutors” Choe Thae Bok and Jang Song Thaek (one being his father’s most trusted international advisor, the other his maternal uncle), the army boss Ri Yong Ho and the top officials in charge of the relations with South Korea and the US, Kim Ki Nam and Kang Sok Ju.

Far from the hierarchy of the regime, observers have recently spotted also other interesting signals at some grassroots levels. Officials seem now to speak a bit more freely than during the Kim II Sung and Kim Jong II era and restaurants owned by North Korean state companies have started to open their doors abroad; not only in China but also in Thailand, Cambodia and as far as Dubai and Amsterdam (the first such restaurant in the West, set up with the cooperation of two local entrepreneurs). It sounds all pretty different from the past, like the Stradivarius violin that has been exhibited at the concert in Paris by the soloist of Unhasu, the flamboyant Mun Kyong Jin. No wonder that now director Chung (who was born in South Korea by a North Korean mother) is looking forward to go back to Pyongyang as soon as possible; he wants to play with his French orchestra and with other North Korean musicians, maybe also in events organized with South Korean colleagues (and that would be another première).

As a famed artist, maestro Chung is definitely entitled to be so enthusiastic, but political analysts prefer to keep a less impatient attitude. Many a delicate balance hinge on the 38th parallel since the second World War. Even China, which has been a traditional defender of Pyongyang in the international arena, could be taken aback now by any quick shift in traditional postures and alignments. Beijing is wading through a leadership transition that might prove more toilsome than...
expected, while its relations with the West seem under growing strain on different levels. Japan too is confronting a complicated political and economic situation, while the Russian leadership is just emerging from a limited but significant electoral challenge. All these countries have their say in the Six-Party Talks on North Korean disarmament, which have been in the doldrums for three years but could restart soon and become the real litmus test for Pyongyang’s intentions and goodwill.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

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