

An outsider's look at what students in Seoul think of North Korea

By Shawn Swinger

SEOUL – During the past few weeks North Korea has issued some grave statements. In line with the 100th birthday of its founder, Kim Il-Sung, the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” (DPRK) announced that it would launch a rocket into space under the pretext of putting a satellite into orbit. A multitude of nations condemned the launch saying that the North was trying to test its ability to fire ballistic missiles, armed with nuclear warheads, which could in theory reach the United States. The proposed launch also threatened to sever a recently agreed upon food aid package which the U.S. was to give to the DPRK in order to assist their malnourished population in return for a moratorium on nuclear advancements.

The missile launch went ahead on April 13 and in moments exploded (literally) in failure. It remains to be seen what steps the international community will take in response to the launch.



Students in Seoul are not preoccupied with North Korea's missile launch.
Photo/Shawn Swinger

A week later, in an oh so stylish move, the North Korean military interrupted a regularly broadcasted program in Pyongyang (the North's capital) to announce that within a span of four minutes they could reduce the capital of South Korea (Seoul) to ashes in retaliation for the South's president's criticism of their regime. Some believe the threat to be a move of the military to re-establish credibility after the failed missile launch and as such it is no more than mere rhetoric. Others fear an actual military provocation, though one short of reducing the 10 million plus city of Seoul to nothingness.

I was in Seoul during the time of the missile launch and had the opportunity to engage with several young South Koreans in order to see these tensions from their perspectives. In a roadside "restaurant", in actuality just a few chairs under a plastic tarp, serviced from an inside kitchen, I sat down with my friend Minju Kang to enjoy some cold noodles with a hard boiled egg, apparently a "North Korean specialty".

Minju grew up in a small town near the border with the DPRK but now lives in Seoul working on her master's degree in comparative literature. Despite the proximity to the border, Minju detailed that she never gave her neighbors across the mine field border much thought. Growing up she was taught to say that the reunification of North and South was her greatest wish along with the desire to see economic aid given to the impoverished nation. Nevertheless, any and all danger that North Korea posed was never taken seriously.

"They threaten us every year so we just got used to it," Minju explained.

However, when the South Korean Cheonan warship was torpedoed by North Korea in 2010, some of Minju's childhood friends were in the military and faced the very real possibility of going to war. She came to the realization that "once my friends were potentially going to war, then the danger became real." Yet, even given the recent tensions on the Korean peninsula, any and all threats are still taken by Minju as mere talk.

When things got personal and people whom she knew got involved then the North became more real. When tensions remain only as a paragraph in a newspaper, all verbal assaults become mere background noise to the busy lives of young Koreans.

I dove into several other conversations with college aged Koreans over barbecue, in a Taco Bell, and elsewhere. One thing that stood out was that no one breached the topic of the DPRK's missile launch. In fact, North Korea was never brought up until I steered the conversation that way. It was after said steering that I discovered their opinions, which did exist and were strong, but the headlines of the North's recklessness were not in the forefront of their minds.

Most of these Koreans had full time jobs, were in school, or were otherwise caught in the frenetic flow of Seoul's metropolitan chaos. Being obsessed with the moves of the DPRK's dictatorship, I assumed that all South Koreans were in a constant state of awareness toward their wayward brother. It shouldn't come as too surprising a truth, though, to realize that most people just never think about it. After all, the same is true in our societies as well.

Amidst the day-to-day fray of bills, work, kids, and so forth, one simply does not have the mental space to contemplate the meaning of these things. However, considering the possibility of nuclear armament, events such as the rashness of North Korea hold consequences not only for those living in Seoul but for us here on the other side of the Pacific. In light of all this, perhaps we can afford to give these realities a little

more thought.

Shawn Swinger is a native of South Lake Tahoe who just spent two weeks in Seoul.