

ASIA BEAT



TOKYO

Mutsuko Murakami

Out of the loop

The news that the United States, North Korea and China will hold trilateral talks next week over the North Korean nuclear standoff stirred complex emotions among many in Japan.

The dialogue is certainly a boost for everyone in East Asia. Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi quickly welcomed the talks. US President George W. Bush called Mr Koizumi on Wednesday night, assuring him that Japan and South Korea would be part of the dialogue in the future.

In theory, Japan and South Korea – which are most at risk from the North's military or nuclear threats – should play a major role in negotiations. But as it stands, the two nations will have to remain on the sidelines for now. While Mr Koizumi's welcoming of the talks was the official position, sentiments among the populace run deeper. "It is certainly another Japan passing up a golden opportunity," a businessman, who echoed the resentment of many of his peers. "How could Japan be left out like this?"

The nation has become sensitive to the fact that, increasingly, it is losing its clout and being ignored by overseas allies and partners. Feelings of frustration are mixed with anticipation about the future and jealousy as China increases its presence in the world.

These deeply felt sentiments can bubble to the surface, often impacting unexpectedly on domestic politics. Mr Koizumi's opponents, within his party and outside, are grabbing the opportunity to blame him for a lack of leadership in international politics.

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun faces a difficult political challenge, as well, because of the trilateral talks.

For the Japanese, another priority is of a much more emotional nature – North Korea's kidnapping of Japanese citizens.

Last October, Mr Koizumi made a historic visit to Pyongyang for an unprecedented summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, which was followed by the dramatic return of five abducted Japanese citizens. But it is suspected that many more people were abducted. What is more, the returnees are unable to visit their families, who are effectively still hostages in North Korea.

Hitomi Soga, 43, is one of the returnees. Her husband of 20 years and their two daughters are still in Pyongyang. "Who broke my family into parts?" she said through tears last week. "Who is going to put us back together again?"

The tension and resentment of the Japanese populace, mixed with frustration over the trilateral talks, could offer a breeding ground for Japanese neo-conservatives' call for stronger, more nationalistic leaders.

An alternative would be a firm partnership between East Asian neighbours – with the involvement of the US – particularly between Japan and South Korea. Mr Roh plans to visit Japan in June, which is a good first step.

Each nation in the region can play a part in the process. Trilateral talks are only the "beginning of a long, intense process of discussion", as US Secretary of State Colin Powell said.

KUALA LUMPUR

S.H. Yong

Unwelcome attention

When elections are just round the corner, politicians usually manage to find some cause to champion. Sometimes their efforts are very welcome – and sometimes they are not.

Take dentist-turned-politician Mohamad Khir Tohy. The chief minister of Selangor state has earned the unsavoury title of "brothel buster" following his raids on health spas and karaoke lounges which offer more than just a healthy massage or somewhere to sing the latest hits.

Donning a peaked cap and jacket, he has been rounding up prostitutes in the hope of wiping out the world's oldest profession in Selangor, which has an estimated 3,000 sex workers.

But it is Dr Khir's statements about his raids that have attracted more attention and guffaws. For instance, he says foreign sex workers head for Malaysia because they can earn more here, as local men tend to spend less time with a prostitute than European clients.

"A shorter period would mean more customers," he told a conference on problems posed by foreign sex workers, whom he said charged between US\$75 (HK\$56) and US\$130 per client.

To help him in his quest, Dr Khir has also asked women to blow the whistle on their straying husbands. He wants them to look for telltale signs of infidelity, such as hotel receipts, when going through their man's clothes. But he has not said what should happen to the men who are caught out.

At the same forum, Deputy Minister for Culture, Arts and Tourism Ng Yen Yen advised wives to "put on more lipstick and try not to put on weight".

Both men subsequently came under heavy fire from women's groups. Dr Khir was criticised for having trivialised prostitution and infidelity, while Dr Ng was told that his suggestions for wives would not stop men cheating.

The All-Women Action Movement says that it is not a woman's responsibility to check on her husband. It says the real problem is that organised crime is behind the prostitution racket.

Another group, the Women's Aid Organisation, said: "The real culprits are often not brought to book, but one often hears of women deported for engaging in sex satisfaction, vowing in court to change."

"Let us place the blame where it really rests – on the shoulders of pimps, agencies, brothel owners and clients."

LEARNING ON THE JOB | DALI YANG

Will China's new leaders rise to the Sars challenge?

Premier Wen Jiabao declared war on severe acute respiratory syndrome last Sunday. Speaking at the National Conference on the Prevention and Treatment of Sars, Mr Wen admitted that the situation in mainland China remained grave. He called for the entire country to mobilise to "resolutely fight the tough battle against the Sars outbreak".

Mr Wen's speech contradicted statements by local and Ministry of Health officials, who said Sars was under control on the mainland. In line with Mr Wen's intervention, various central government ministries and agencies began new initiatives to stem the spread of the disease. Chinese airlines, for example, began to make masks available for passengers.

The decisive intervention by Mr Wen, coupled with an extended visit by President Hu Jintao to Guangdong, indicate that the mainland's new leaders have finally faced up to the severity of the outbreak. Yet, the fact that it has taken this long for the national leadership to publicly commit the country to the fight against Sars speaks volumes about the inadequacies afflicting the mainland's system in dealing with crises and disasters.

Since the late 1990s, the mainland's leaders have accelerated efforts to improve governance by downsizing the government, reforming the administrative approval system and increasing transparency. Many localities set up "one-stop" administrative centres to make government services more accessible and efficient. Internationally, mainland leaders have aspired for China to be known as a responsible power.

For these improvements have largely been confined to the area of economic governance, and many of the institutional innovations have been products of intergovernmental competition for investments. In the handling of epidemics and other types of disasters, however, old habits have persisted.

Threatened with penalties for failure to achieve various targets, local officials instinctively seek to minimise the scale of disasters that occur on their watch.

Meanwhile, under the rubric of "stability", the Communist Party's propaganda establishment has imposed tough restrictions

on news reporting that might reflect badly on the leadership and the country's image.

These perverse incentives, coupled with the uncertainties of leadership transition, have proved fatal in China's handling of the Sars outbreak. For several months, local and then central government officials limited the release of information about the incidence and severity of Sars, and dragged their feet in permitting World Health Organisation inspectors to visit Guangdong and other affected areas.

Until recently, the party propaganda apparatus had a virtual ban on media



investigations of the outbreak.

While medical professionals braced themselves to face a highly contagious disease, China's leaders – ever preoccupied with the promotion of growth and employment – were convinced that silence was golden.

Tellingly, Long Yong-jia, China's former World Trade Organisation negotiator, went on record as saying the media in Hong Kong was hyping Sars. Some Chinese officials also bristled at reports that the virus originated in Guangdong province.

In an age of globalisation, such failures to share information with the public and the outside world have proved an enormous

mistake. There can be no doubt that China's efforts to preserve the appearance of business as usual in an era of global mobility helped spread the Sars virus globally and within the country. Moreover, local and Ministry of Health officials repeatedly asserted that the outbreak was being brought under effective control.

In the face of growing numbers of infections, such assertions, contradicted by the testimony of some doctors who defied the government and revealed more Sars cases, only served to undermine the government's credibility with the public. The suppression of information has aggravated the public's anxiety, sparking panic buying in Guangdong and other places.

It is only in the face of simmering public discontent, growing pressure from the WHO, and escalating costs to China's reputation and international transactions, that its leaders have finally caught up to the severity of the Sars crisis.

China has become more forthcoming with the public and has allowed WHO teams to visit hospitals in Guangdong and Beijing – including some military hospitals believed to have unreported Sars cases. At the time of writing, the WHO still had not received full co-operation from Beijing city officials.

Vice-Premier Wu Yi, the person overseeing the management of the crisis, apparently believes that transparency will help kill rumours and help the mainland restore its reputation. In the process, the central government has improved the data reporting system and begun to nationalise a quick-response mechanism to deal with public health emergencies. Yet there are limits to the transparency. The WHO teams will need to continue to negotiate their way into mainland hospitals and the mainland media remains hobbled in its reporting.

China's new generation of national leaders came to office proclaiming their affinity for the interests of the people. The Sars crisis has severely tested that affinity. The latest initiatives by Mr Hu and Mr Wen suggest that they are climbing a steep learning curve.

Dali Yang is an associate professor of political science at the University of Chicago and the author of several books on China's reforms, including *Reforming Remaking the Chinese Leviathan*.

Why Arabs reject US democracy

PETER KAMMERER'S WORLD



details are vague. Michael Doran, professor of Near East Studies at Princeton University and senior fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations, said the administration's objectives for Iraq were unclear and the extent to which Iraqis would get to choose their own political system had yet to be spelled out. "This is not at all clear because the transition process has also not been defined," he said.

Professor Doran's colleague at the Council on Foreign Relations and fellow Middle East analyst, Scott Lasensky, said that although "the idea of regional democracy and the Israeli-Palestinian road map were not directly related, the concept was the same. He said the yet-to-be-published road map will call loudly for Palestinian reform so that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's government could be more accountable.

"This fits into the larger rhetoric that the Bush administration has been putting forward about trying to induce political, social and economic reform in the Middle East," Professor Lasensky said. But he said the process would not be as simple as some officials in the Bush government were suggesting. Iraq's transformation from a war zone to a liberal-democratic state within two years was the belief of people living in a fantasy world. "Change will have to come slowly, although it is not outlandish to hope for an Iraq that is more open and respectful of international norms," Professor Lasensky said. "We can start slowly and try to encourage the government. We're going to need a lot of help."

For now, that idea has been shunned by Mr Bush. Despite a united front with coalition partner Britain, underlying tensions might get in the way of even a settlement between Israelis and Palestinians. Obvious differences of opinion extend to the heart of the Bush administration. In recent days, Mr Rumsfeld has repeatedly warned Syria against harbouring former Iraqi officials and developing chemical weapons – deepening speculation that it is and Israel's government would be next on the US agenda.

Dovish Secretary of State Colin Powell has played down the warlike words and suggestions that Syria, Iran or any other Arab nation could be attacked next. The conflicting positions are worrying Arab governments. Talk of the democratisation of the Middle East is dismissed.

Azzam Tamimi, the director of the

Institute of Islamic Political Thought, a London-based think-tank, says the scepticism was rooted in the long US involvement in the region with autocratic regimes such as the monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Jordan. "People know that certain regimes have, for many years, been loyal to the US and been supported by the US," Professor Tamimi said. "They know that the US has directly or indirectly aborted some important democratic steps taken over the past two decades."

Neither was the road map for a Palestinian state being taken seriously by many Arabs. They believed the initiative had been taken to pave the way for the attack on Iraq. The approach was flawed and was to do with the creation of a market economy in the region rather than democracy, the Palestinian-born and Kuwaiti-educated academic claimed. "By democracy, they don't mean the right of the people to choose their government and make it accountable to them or that there is a rule of law and equality before the law," he said.

That is not what America wants for other people. If people in the Middle East are given this, the first thing they will do is tell America to leave them alone and not to meddle in their affairs any more."

Professor Tamimi said the people ruled by Arab governments seek democracy – on their own terms – to emancipate and liberate them from oppression, injustice and corruption. He believed Iran was the most democratic country in the region, although the process was in its infancy and it was still imperfect as a model.

For former US ambassador to Bahrain David Ransom, who has also held diplomatic posts in Iran, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, the process would be made clearer if the US issued a yearly report on democracy, in the same way it did with human rights.

"But how far we can go, how easy and

how fast, with what complications to other interests, are all questions that have to be answered in each country differently," said Mr Ransom, a long-time member of the Middle East Institute in Washington. "There's not going to be any easy way of change in the Middle East – that's for sure."

Academic specialists on democratisation recognise, as did Alexander Hamilton, writing more than 200 years ago in the *Federalist Papers*, that democratic institutions need to be tailored to reflect the situations and historical realities of each country. The process cannot be achieved quickly by using a specific formula.

As an ideal for the Middle East, democracy is an admirable suggestion and few dispute it is longed for by Arabs suppressed by monarchies and autocracies. But if Mr Bush and others in his government are sincere in achieving such a goal, they have some steep hills to climb.

Peter Kammerer is the Post's Foreign Editor
peter.kammerer@scmp.com

OBSERVER



Frank Ching

Baby blues

Asia is vast, with more than half the world's population. It is no wonder that parts of this enormous region can be inundated by floods, while other areas are parched.

Similarly, some governments are virtually begging their people to procreate, while others are overwhelmed with babies.

Hong Kong has one of the region's lowest birth rates, well below the replacement level. However, it has not adopted heroic measures to encourage marriage and childbirth, perhaps because its population continues to increase through migration from the mainland.

Singapore offers incentives for couples to have second and third babies. The country's fertility rate is 1.4, far below the 2.1 figure that reflects the ability of a population to replace itself. But the fertility rate for the majority Chinese population is even lower at 1.3. Unless the trend is reversed, the Chinese population will decline, relative to the Malay and Indian communities, which Singapore's political leaders do not want to see.

Last Valentine's Day, the "Reframing Singapore" campaign was launched, intended to encourage unmarried Singaporeans to "mate and multiply". The government is trying to encourage young people, especially well-educated ones, to get married and have babies. Polls suggest young people, particularly women, want compensation for putting their careers on hold while raising a family.

Their demands include free pre- and post-natal care for mothers and children, as well as free schooling. Some women say they will consider having babies if they can work from home, something that is increasingly possible in the Internet age.

While Japan's population is still getting larger, the growth is almost imperceptible, having slowed to 0.11 per cent last year, the lowest growth rate in more than 50 years. At the same time, the population of people aged 65 or over has grown to 18.5 per cent of the population. There is a fear that, in time, there will not be enough

working people to support the growing number of retirees.

The Japanese government is considering measures to encourage more births through legislation that would make the workplace more accommodating to the needs of parents, as well as reforms in welfare policies. Interestingly, the number of marriages has been on the rise for three years, a phenomenon that may be related to the growing number of crises that have emerged in the 21st century, particularly terrorism. Some experts say Japanese are responding to such tension by seeking comfort in strong family ties.

In Taiwan, too, birth rates are at a record low. Women used to give birth to an average of six children in the 1940s and 1950s. Even in 1976, the rate was 3.08 children per woman, but that number dropped to 2.4 in 1981 and 1.4 in 2001.

One proposal last year was to levy a "singlets tax" whereby healthy, unmarried people over the age of 40 would have to pay a fine. However, it was pointed out that such a law would penalise Vice-President Annette Lu Hsiu-lien, Mainland Affairs Council chairman Tsai Ing-wen and the head of the Council of Labour Affairs, Chen Chu. The proposal was quickly dropped.

Taiwan has studied plans to simply pay women to have a second child. However, the incentives did not attract much public support.

Now, it is studying other ways to encourage women to have more children, including tax cuts, government subsidies, public day-care centres and preferential health care for children under the age of six. The Taiwan Society for Reproductive Medicine has called for significant compensation for egg and sperm donors, as well as for surrogate mothers.

But India is a different story. There, the government is thinking of ways to curb the population explosion. One measure under consideration is to prevent politicians with more than two children from running in elections for parliament and state assemblies. The idea is that politicians should serve as models for the rest of the nation.

Already, some states have laws that bar people with more than two children from contesting elections at the village, town and city levels. India has more than one billion people. But China, with 1.3 billion people, is still top of the population league. China's success at reining in population growth, including the killing of female babies, has given it a new problem: more boys than girls, so that millions of young men will have no hope of getting a wife. Such are the problems of Asia.

Frank Ching is a Hong Kong-based journalist and commentator
frankching1@aol.com