

# The U.S. and South Korea: Surmounting the Crisis

William J. Barnds

Few if any of America's relationships with its allies are likely to present the Carter administration with more complex and difficult dilemmas than does South Korea. During his drive for the presidency Jimmy Carter was critical of the Republic of Korea (ROK) for its suppression of human rights and said he would remove the U.S. ground troops there over the next several years. (The 42,000 U.S. forces in Korea include about 7,000 air force personnel and a few hundred sailors. About half of the 35,000 ground forces are in combat units, and the others provide logistical support.)

Such statements frightened Seoul and worried the Japanese Government, and now President Carter must either carry them out or explain why he must back away from his promises. To take a firm stance against a country of marginal importance, such as Chile, is relatively easy. The risks—to U.S. interests and to peace—are far greater when the Korean peninsula is involved.

The recent revelations of widespread bribery of U.S. Government officials by Seoul during the past six years must be appraised against the background of shifting American views about the strategic importance of Korea under changing world conditions and of growing South Korean doubts about U.S. reliability. The Nixon Doctrine of 1969 calling for our allies to assume greater responsibility for their own defense, the dramatic opening to Peking in 1971 (without consulting our allies), the reduction in 1971 of about one-third of the sixty thousand U.S. forces in South Korea, and public pressures that led to the withdrawal from Vietnam without having achieved either peace or honor—all these led South Korean leaders to conclude that increasingly they would have to fend for themselves. Since they believed national survival to be at stake, any means to deal with the problem was permissible.

*Fall of the "Korean Lobby."* Any appraisal at this time of the activities of the Republic of Korea inside the

United States must remain a tentative one, since much of the information that has so far become available is in the form of allegations and unconfirmed reports. Nonetheless, it appears that Seoul has carried out a program aimed at influencing U.S. Government officials and opinionmakers that is of far greater magnitude than is traditional among governments, in some cases by resorting to clearly illegal methods. American newspapers believe they have uncovered a major scandal, the Department of Justice is conducting a major investigation into South Korea's actions, and Congress has launched investigations of its own.

The program apparently began about 1971 as a result of the ROK's concern that it was being abandoned by the United States. At first, it seems, Seoul tried to influence the executive branch as well as the Congress. But by 1973 or 1974 Secretary of State Kissinger apparently had convinced South Korean leaders that American support would remain firm despite the changes in U.S. Asian policy. However, he also pointed out that repression inside South Korea was making it increasingly difficult to retain congressional approval for military aid and credit sales and was creating pressures to reduce or even eliminate the U.S. troop presence. Thus the Congress became the focal point of the Korean effort, although administration officials continued to receive red-carpet treatment.

Much of this effort was along traditional diplomatic lines: invitations to lavish parties in Washington and Seoul; gifts to congressmen or other public figures who visited Korea; awarding of honorary degrees, etc. But two aspects of the alleged Korean activities went beyond this. The first, which has been given relatively little attention by the American press, was directed at Americans of Korean ancestry or Korean citizens residing in this country. Some of these activities simply involved patriotic appeals to such people to support the Park regime—or at least not oppose it—in view of the threat from North Korea. But in some cases crude threats were apparently made—if their criticism continued, their relatives in Korea would suffer.

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more dramatic—aspect of the Korean activities were the reported contributions to key congressmen. Some officials of the executive branch apparently knew the nature if not the magnitude of the Korean program. The then Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird claimed that he had warned high administration officials of the dangers when the program began, and U.S. officials may even have warned the Koreans privately of the dangers involved. But no action was taken by the administration.

Some of the congressmen apparently thought they were receiving nothing more than campaign contributions from Korean-American businessmen and reported the contributions, as required by law. Others apparently made no such reports. There have been many charges that some contributions—envelopes filled with hundred dollar bills—were made directly by Korean officials. Equally damaging have been the charges that the large contributions made by Park Tong Sun, a Korean-American entrepreneur, were made on the direct orders of President Park Chung Hee. The charges have been denied by Seoul, but Park Tong Sun has left the United States and shows no inclination to return for questioning.

Such allegations of direct involvement by President Park made the rumored American bugging of the Blue House, the South Korean presidential mansion, potentially explosive—especially if in the course of any trial a U.S. judge were to order such evidence to be produced in court. Fuel was added to the fire in late November when Kim Sang Keun, a senior official of the powerful Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) stationed in Washington, refused orders to return home and asked for political asylum for himself and his family in the United States—a unique instance of an intelligence official defecting to an *allied* country! South Korean leaders feared he would provide testimony and evidence that would be extremely damaging to Seoul. President Park promptly fired the top leaders of the KCIA in an attempt to disassociate himself from whatever had been done. Yet such a move raised rather than answered important questions. If he had not known about the KCIA program, was he really in control of his government? If he had known, how could U.S. relations with his government fail to be damaged severely?

Such anxieties prompted Seoul's open protests in November over the U.S. refusal to deny publicly the bugging charges, but the State Department rejected the protests. By late December, with relations increasingly strained, Seoul adopted a more conciliatory line. It announced that it accepted U.S. private assurances that the Blue House had not been bugged, and renewed its efforts to persuade Americans of South Korea's strategic importance. It argued that this should be the determining aspect of the relationship and that the United States should accept the necessity of a continued U.S. troop presence. The Park government also allowed South Korean newspapers to publish the allegations regarding Park Tong Sun for the first time, while denying vigorously that he had any connection with the South Korean Government or that his activities would be allowed to damage U.S.-South Korean ties in any way.

What has been the impact of the affair to date? How is it likely to—and how should it—affect U.S. views and

policies? Up until the summer of 1976 one could argue that Seoul's effort had paid off. U.S. military *aid* had steadily declined, but this reflected a worldwide trend in U.S. policy and a greater South Korean ability to rely on credit sales as much as it did growing congressional opposition to support of South Korea. American troops had not been reduced since 1971, and nothing done by Congress had been seriously harmful to Seoul. Many congressmen who had opposed singling out South Korea for aid cuts were those who had allegedly benefitted from its largess.



Park Chung Hee

Obviously, the situation has changed significantly since the scandal became public. Critics of South Korea have increased and become more aggressive, and Seoul's defenders have been put on the defensive. How many congressmen will henceforth be willing to speak favorably of South Korea—or vote in favor of it on key issues—lest their constituents think they have been bribed? The challenge by Congressman Benjamin Rosenthal to the naming of Clement Zablocki, the senior Democratic member of the House International Relations Committee, as the committee's new chairman was based partly upon Zablocki's links to Seoul. While the challenge failed, the substantial support it received—72 votes against 182—is an indication of a new environment in Congress. Moreover, the key formative experience of many of the intermediate-level leaders in Congress was the Korean War. They wanted to believe that America's actions there had been worthwhile despite the stalemate at the war's end. South Korea's economic and political progress in the 1960's was seen by them as justifying our sacrifices—33,629 dead and over \$12 billion in aid since 1953. Seoul's recent policies have neutralized that attitude for many of these congressmen. And most of the new wave of congressmen (whose

formative experience was Vietnam), while not mechanically equating the Korean and Vietnamese situations, are almost automatically suspicious of close U.S. ties to Seoul.

As for American attitudes and government policy generally, several points need to be made. *There is no justification for American self-righteousness.* What the Korean Central Intelligence Agency was doing in this country was what the leaders of the American Central Intelligence Agency did in many lands as it (and the political leaders responsible for controlling it) lost their sense of perspective and came to see themselves as unrestricted by law or ethics. But South Korea can derive little comfort from such a fact, for when the CIA's activities became known, it (and the U.S. Government) suffered at the hands of Congress, the press, and the public. South Koreans can now be under no illusions that diplomatic or even strategic considerations will serve to justify a cover-up. Nor should they; the Executive and the Congress should make a thorough and objective investigation and carry it through to the stage of prosecution wherever firm evidence is available. At the same time, they—and the media—should distinguish between those guilty of improprieties and those guilty of crimes. However, even if evidence of wrongdoing sufficient for prosecution turns out to be less extensive than newspaper stories have suggested, South Korea has fallen badly in public esteem in this country—an esteem already diminished by Park's harsh treatment of dissidents, and by the activities of the Reverend Moon and his disciples and suspicions that his movement is tied to the South Korean Government. Seoul can hardly count on continued U.S. backing without making major changes in its policies.

**K**orean fears. No appraisal of North or South Korean policies can be made outside the context of the widespread hostility, bitterness, and fear between these two states. Their mutual hatred matches, if it does not surpass, that of any two states in the world. It is tragic as well as ironic that the benefits that this homogeneous people expected from their deliverance from Japanese colonialism were offset by the partition of the country. This partition, due more to great power inadvertence than design, is now sustained by the power of entrenched interest groups in each state. Their fear that they would lose everything unless they control any unified Korean nation is greater than their willingness to take risks for unification.

The devastation caused by the Korean War has left an enduring mark on Korean attitudes. The unexpected suddenness of the North Korean invasion, the quick collapse of the South Korean forces, and North Korean brutalities during the conflict have resulted in a widespread South Korean fear that another invasion could occur at any time. Such a conflict would be even more destructive than before, given the development of modern weapons and the vast military buildup in both states since 1953. The Park government uses these fears to justify its rule, but they existed before he came to power. Even opponents of the government have called for the retention of the U.S. troop presence because of their fear of North Korea.

North Korean leaders are not only convinced that they were robbed of the fruits of their successful defeat of the South by U.S. intervention, but are confident that if the United States were to disengage from South Korea they could, by one method or another, gain control of the entire peninsula. Kim Il Sung, while originally influenced if not controlled by the Soviet Union, has long since learned how to play off Moscow and Peking to the benefit of Pyongyang. He is also convinced that in view of the peninsula's location between the USSR, China, and Japan only a unified and communized Korea will be able permanently to resist external pressures or control. Kim Il Sung's constant calls for the liberation and unification of Korea play into the hands of the government in Seoul. They worry in Tokyo and Washington—and probably Moscow and Peking as well—that Kim may at some point start a new war, which could draw in the major powers.

The importance of peace on the Korean peninsula is too obvious to require elaboration. However, the American interest in South Korea's security is less clear and requires appraisal. While hardly vital, South Korean security is important to the United States for several reasons. *First*, we must discourage an invasion from the North, which in view of the U.S. military presence and of U.S., Soviet, and Chinese treaty commitments would make it extremely difficult for the major powers to remain detached. *Second*, a U.S. abandonment would have a dramatic impact on Japan. Japanese attitudes toward Korea are diverse, complex, and ambiguous. Nonetheless, the shock that would follow any North Korean takeover of South Korea would make the Nixon shocks of the early 1970's seem like minor tremors. Whether this would lead Tokyo to undertake a major rearmament program or to accommodate itself to one or both of the giant Communist powers is difficult to predict, but either of these moves would undermine U.S.-Japanese relations. Indeed, our manner of handling the Korean and Taiwan issues may be as important for the future of U.S.-Japanese relations as how we handle our bilateral issues with Tokyo. *Third*, it would weaken U.S. credibility elsewhere in the world. The fact that the credibility argument was misused in the Vietnam case is no reason to misuse it in an opposite manner in the case of Korea. *Finally*, even a minimal American concern for human rights requires the recognition that a takeover of the entire peninsula by North Korea—one of the most rigid totalitarian states on earth—would spell the end of any hope that Koreans would enjoy the most basic human rights. (The United States has significant economic interests in South Korea—our twelfth largest trading partner in 1976—but these alone do not warrant a major U.S. commitment to South Korea's security.)

**M**ilitary security and human rights. Many people discuss American policy toward South Korea as if it posed a stark and simple choice between supporting human rights or maintaining military security. They give a virtually absolute priority to one or the other of these issues, relegating any concern they have for the other to whatever measures will not interfere with their top priority goal. Such views over-

look one essential point: A policy that neglects either of these two issues is likely to fail at some point. This is true for several reasons. *First*, if human rights continue to be trampled upon in South Korea, U.S. support for that country's security will continue to erode. There will be increasing restrictions on arms sales; congressional pressure for the withdrawal of U.S. air as well as ground forces may grow; and if a North Korean attack occurs, Congress might refuse to authorize U.S. military participation despite the 1953 U.S.-ROK Defense Treaty. (U.S. support in the event of war is not automatic but depends upon authorization by the U.S. Government according to its constitutional processes, which is a major reason Seoul is so anxious that U.S. ground troops remain in a position that would make our involvement virtually automatic.) *Second*, a South Korean government that ignores human rights and—*equally important*—fails to build political institutions that provide for a measure of popular political participation will lack strong foundations. The morale of the South Korean people will probably decline and pressures will build up that may lead to violent—although non-Communist—upheavals. (During 1976 South Korean citizens began to listen to Radio Pyongyang to learn about the KCIA scandal in the United States—even though such actions are a crime—because their own media was not allowed to print the story.) One-man rule sometimes provides short-term stability—which often appeared to be the only concern of recent U.S. administrations. But a politically viable system that provides for an orderly succession as well as some popular participation is what is required, however difficult it is to achieve.

*Third*, if the United States neglects South Korean security and war develops, the amount of suffering and the trend toward garrison states will rise dramatically, no matter what the outcome of the conflict. One need not view Kim Il Sung as a fanatic who decides each morning whether to start a war the following day to recognize that he would have no scruples about launching a war if he thought it would achieve his goal of unification. For years North Korea has been pressing on the South far more than Seoul has been leaning on the North. Even if Seoul timed its revelations of the existence of the extensive tunnels dug under the Demilitarized Zone for maximum propaganda results—and exaggerated the number of men who could be rushed through them—not even Park Chung Hee's bitterest critics have claimed that they were being dug from South to North!

**T**he troop removal issue. A concern for peace on the Korean peninsula and the security of South Korea need not mean a permanent U.S. military presence in that country. Indeed, a retention of U.S. ground troops for more than a few years is a disservice to South Koreans as well as to the American people—although this will be difficult for most Koreans to accept. (U.S. air units probably need to remain somewhat longer, but even they should be phased out in time.)

Before setting forth a proposed U.S. policy toward Korea there are arguments against removal of the U.S. troop presence that should be considered. One is that

these troops are a key factor in deterring an attack by Pyongyang—and that they even provide Peking and Moscow with some leverage in restraining Kim Il Sung. This latter point is probably correct, but it does not automatically follow that Kim would attack as soon as the last troops had left. President Carter has specified that U.S. air units would remain behind and the Security Treaty continue in force, and ground troops could occasionally be flown back into South Korea for military exercises. South Korea's ground forces are presently larger than those of the North, although they possess fewer heavy weapons. In a few years they can be built up to discourage any North Korean military attack. President Park himself has occasionally admitted this, and many U.S. officials privately make the same point.

Some observers hold that there "may be almost as much danger of war being started by Seoul as by Pyongyang" (see Leslie Gelb, "Arms Sales," *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1976-77). While any sudden removal of U.S. military support could lead to such panic among ROK leaders that they would launch an attack out of desperation, they are unlikely to follow this course under any other circumstances. The city of Seoul, in which they have invested much of their resources and energy over the past twenty-five years, is so close to the DMZ as to be vulnerable to destruction. North Korean forces and fortifications are so extensive north of the DMZ that South Korea, which will long remain dependent upon U.S. logistic support, could hardly hope to make significant northward advances. Such advances, in any event, would risk a repeat of the 1950 situation. Moscow would not permit the destruction of a Communist state, and Peking would not permit the establishment of a unified anti-Communist Korea (linked to the U.S. and Japan) on its Manchurian frontier.

Another, and more serious, argument against removing U.S. troops is that incidents along the DMZ might escalate more rapidly in the absence of U.S. forces. There is no completely satisfactory way to deal with this danger, but it is useful to keep it in perspective by remembering that even today U.S. ability to effect restraint is far greater on the sea and in the air—where the ratio of American to South Korean forces is substantial—than on the ground—where the ROK already outnumber U.S. forces ten to one. In addition, as we reduce our troops we should seek bilateral understandings with Moscow and Peking that all three powers will exert heavy pressure on their respective allies before as well as after any incidents. Whatever their differences with us, neither Communist power wants a war on the Korean peninsula.

What the South Koreans basically need is a sense of confidence—confidence in themselves and in the reliability of the U.S. commitment even as its form is changing. Self-confidence will develop as the South grows stronger. It is already pronounced in the economic sphere as the result of South Korea's success in adjusting to the oil crisis. Its economy expanded by 8 per cent annually in *real* terms in 1974 and 1975 and by 15 per cent in 1976, while the North Korean economy has been growing by only a few per cent a year. (For a description of North Korea's recent political and economic difficul-

ties see Chang-Sik Lee, "New Paths for North Korea, *Problems of Communism*, March-April, 1977.) South Koreans now feel they will be a modern industrialized state within a generation. Thus confidence should develop in the military sphere as their strength increases here too, provided they receive adequate assurances of continued U.S. support.

**B**uilding a new relationship. What should this reassurance consist of? And, equally important, what should the United States require in turn? The U.S. needs to do three things to reassure the ROK. The *first* is to make it clear that the U.S. military forces within the country will be phased down only as ROK military deficiencies are overcome. This has been promised in general terms, but the specifics need to be worked out. The *second* is to work out a long-term agreement covering the supply of the type of arms—essentially defensive—that South Korea needs to deter a North Korean invasion or to halt it in its tracks should it occur. The *third*—and probably most controversial and difficult—is a joint resolution of Congress affirming the validity of the Security Treaty and indicating that U.S. military support will be given to South Korea in the event of a clear Northern invasion. This resolution should also cover the long-term provision of arms referred to above.

Obviously, Congress is not going to agree to any such joint resolution under present conditions. But in a year or two, after the KCIA affair has largely run its course, it should be possible to secure passage of such a resolution. The administration should use the intervening time to prepare the ground. (The administration would also have to be able to reassure Congress that it has insisted that KCIA covert operations in this country be halted, but one assumes this point has already been made clear to Seoul.) Specifically, we must persuade South Korea to deny any intention to develop not only a nuclear weapons program but a nuclear weapons *capability*. It has already signed and ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has—under heavy U.S. pressure—canceled its contract with France for a nuclear reprocessing facility. Thus what is required is less a shift in direction than persuasive actions that no shift is intended.

Far more important in obtaining a congressional resolution reaffirming the Security Treaty, however, is to persuade South Korea that it must reverse the trend toward one-man rule and repression. Power within the country must be shared more widely. This is a matter of political viability as well as of human rights. The chances of Korea becoming a fully democratic state in the next decade are slight. The executive is bound to be the dominant political force, but it need not be virtually the *only* force. The system that obtained from 1965 to 1972 provided a considerable measure of stability, efficiency, and a level of participation that satisfied the great bulk of the Korean people. A return to something along these lines would not satisfy everyone in the United States or South Korea, but it would indicate that the American Government was determined not to neglect human rights (which are defined variously in different parts of the world) or launch a crusade to impose our specific values on other nations.

The present government will not return to such a system on its own initiative, and congressional legislation that singles out South Korea for special punishment is more likely to inflame nationalist sentiment and cause the government to dig in its heels than it is to bring about the desired response. Seoul will continue to believe (or at least to hope) that even the Carter administration will be concerned primarily with Japanese views and preventing a war on the Korean peninsula and thus will follow the course of Secretary Kissinger, continuing, however reluctantly, to support South Korea.



Kim Il Sung

The leaders of the Carter administration should approach South Korean leadership *privately* and make it plain that unless Seoul makes these reforms—in its own manner, and under no *public* pressure from outsiders—the *administration itself* will gradually disengage from South Korea. (The importance of Japan indicates that it should be consulted, but the need to act privately means that such consultations will have to be carefully managed.) So far the Carter administration has stressed its determination to keep its commitment to remove the ground troops, but has argued for continued arms sales despite its criticism of Seoul's suppression of human rights. The administration has probably not yet decided whether it will maintain this position or will exert pressure privately upon Seoul.

What are the prospects that Seoul will yield to U.S. pressure? South Korea's dependence upon U.S. arms provides powerful leverage, but the U.S. would have to use this skillfully and with a good sense of timing. Moreover, Seoul has heavy foreign debts. It is capable of repaying them under present circumstances but is dependent upon governmental and private loans and invest-

ments from abroad to cover its balance-of-payments deficits and to continue its economic growth. Economic progress is one major element in the public's acquiescence in the government's tight political controls—the other being the ROK's assertion that its policies have provided military security to the country. These private loans and investments have been made upon the judgment that the United States will ultimately guarantee South Korea's military security and that the loans and investments therefore are safe. Thus an eventual shift in U.S. military policy could not help but weaken South Korea economically, even if no such result were intended.

Nonetheless, Seoul would be tempted to stall and to make only token concessions—or perhaps even tighten its controls initially. Some specific U.S. actions might be required, such as a temporary slowdown of arms deliveries and a reduction in Export-Import loans. Tactical nuclear weapons could also be removed from South Korea, but that should be done in any case. Even if we intended to use them in the event of war—a dubious policy on many grounds—we would reintroduce them quickly. Faced with a determined U.S. position, but one that offered the benefits of enduring support once a new relationship was established, Seoul would be very likely to agree.

It can be argued that this is crude intervention in South Korea's domestic affairs, but such an argument overlooks certain key points. *First*, supplying arms to a government that rests upon its armed forces inevitably involves the United States in South Korean politics. *Second*, we should not authorize any covert CIA activities to manipulate South Korean politics, but only indicate that our foreign policy toward South Korea and our degree of support will be based upon *our* judgment of its political viability and the basic nature of its political life. We refuse to provide arms to certain other states on such grounds, and rightly so. *Third*, any successful congressional move to halt arms sales to Korea and set a definite date for a troop pullout would probably result in the immediate fall of the Korean Government—surely as great an act of intervention as the course described above.

It can also be argued that we should give top priority to seeking agreement by Moscow and Peking to help “normalize” relations between the two Koreas so as to reduce their hostility, or to work toward major power guarantees of Korean neutrality, arms limitations

agreements, or mutual agreements among the major powers not to intervene in the event of a new Korean war. Most of these ideas are worth pursuing. Indeed, some already have been tried by Washington and Tokyo—but without success, due to Pyongyang's ability to play Moscow and Peking off against each other. Others are worth continued probing, but alongside of, rather than in place of, the policy advocated above.

Is it realistic to expect that a policy of providing more weapons to the armed forces will not lead the military establishment to increase rather than reduce its political role? Yes, if the eventual alternative is less arms. The ideal approach would be for a reduction of arms in both North and South Korea, but who is going to check and enforce compliance? Moreover, the type of weapons the South Korean forces need—heavy weapons and aircraft—are hardly likely to further enhance their political role.

Once Seoul took serious steps to open up its political system the atmosphere in the United States would change substantially, and there would be a good chance of building a new and mature relationship. In such an atmosphere, assurances of long-term military support would become politically feasible. ROK confidence in the United States—and in itself—would increase. Americans would then recognize that the attitude they have carried over from the 1950's—that South Korea is a liability rather than an asset—was outmoded and inappropriate.

A final argument for such a policy concerns the likely North Korean reaction. The present North Korean leaders give every sign of believing their own propaganda: that Seoul is little more than an American puppet kept in power by the presence of U.S. troops. In fact, once the troops leave and the ROK not only continues in power but South Korea (with twice the population of the North) continues to outpace North Korea, there are likely to be profound psychological, ideological, and political shocks in Pyongyang. Perhaps at age sixty-five Kim Il Sung is too old to adjust his perceptions to new realities. But the successors of Communist rulers have shown a marked inclination to follow their own courses rather than the paths charted by their former mentors. Thus when the rulers of North Korea realize how unrealistic are their hopes for a pro-Communist revolution in the South, they may gradually be forced to move toward a new appraisal of the ROK. Such a possibility offers the best hope for an easing of tensions and for an eventual move toward accommodation by the two Koreas—such as occurred between East and West Germany.