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Introduction

I WAS BOTH PLEASED and challenged by my selection in 1978 to be ambassador to the Republic of Korea. Although I was considered a China specialist for most of my foreign service career, I had been exposed at an early stage to Korean events and dealt extensively with Korea as part of my East Asian responsibilities in several Washington assignments. For a person with my background, the embassy in Seoul was a prized post. South Korea was in the midst of a fascinating transformation, and since so much was at stake for the United States, special care was required in the management of our relationship. Quite frankly, I also was relieved to be leaving Washington. By this time, Korea had lost its image among Americans as one of East Asia's economic miracles and had become something of a political pariah. The basic problem was the surge of political oppression, but many Americans went beyond this disturbing turn of events to bash Korea quite indiscriminately. As an official dealing with Korea, I was weary of being treated as a surrogate for the offending Koreans. Far more disturbing to me, I was deeply dismayed by President Carter's stubborn effort to withdraw U.S. ground combat forces from Korea, doing so in the face of almost universal hope in East Asia that the United States would strengthen, not weaken, its presence in the region after the demoralizing end of the war in Vietnam.

Before leaving for Korea in mid-1978, I felt that the worst was over on the troop withdrawal issue, and I was mildly hopeful that I could contribute

The opinions and views expressed in this book are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of State or the United States Government.

usefully to a normalization of our relations with Korea. Nevertheless, I went to Seoul with my eyes open. I knew that President Park Chung Hee, kingpin of the Korean political scene and architect of its remarkable economic progress, was in serious trouble. As a taxi driver once put it to me, Park had been “too much of a dictator for too long.” I was also aware of the animus pervading many of the groups opposing him. Within our official American community, I had thought and talked about the possibility that his regime might not survive. Yet, along with everyone else, I was stunned when President Park was assassinated on the night of October 26, 1979, by one of his most trusted aides, thus beginning an extraordinary period in the Republic of Korea and in its relations with the United States.

Korea’s Circumstances in 1979

During the eighteen years of President Park’s rule, the Republic of Korea flourished, changing rapidly from a weak, essentially agrarian society highly dependent on foreign aid to a militarily strong, industrial nation with per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and foreign trade approaching the levels of some developed countries. The formula for this extraordinary transformation combined many elements: stability from relatively enlightened rule, massive educational efforts, social mobility, hard work, strong entrepreneurial spirit, and an export-driven development scheme that blended the government’s nurturing role with market forces.

Almost all South Koreans, including critics, credited Park for the vision and drive that brought about this leap of progress, but by 1979 much of the glitter had worn off. Economic growth was faltering, and people were suffering from inflation caused by escalating import costs and misguided investment decisions. Workers were restive, and many others were also grumbling about deteriorating economic conditions. More important, Park’s resort in the early 1970s to heavy-handed authoritarian rule embittered a wide variety of people and generated strong opposition in political, labor, educational, and religious circles.

External events compounded South Korea’s anxieties. The failure of America’s engagement in Vietnam obviously worried Korea, Asia’s only other evenly split nation facing a massive military threat from its northern half. Concern about the outcome was intensified for Koreans, especially the military, because two Korean divisions fought in Vietnam as part of the American-led effort. Some people also feared that the new U.S. relationship with China might somehow disadvantage South Korea. In a far more tangible

way, President Carter's abortive effort to withdraw U.S. ground forces from Korea during his first years in office cast a shadow on the U.S. commitment to security, deeply disturbing almost all South Koreans, including Park's opponents. Although this threat had been lifted by the time of Park's assassination, the scars remained, made even more sensitive by the Korea bashing in America over human rights issues and a bribery scandal.

The most pervasive and constant anxiety was still the perceived threat from North Korea. South Koreans had by this time largely overcome their postwar psychological inferiority complex vis-à-vis North Korea, but memories of invasion and fear of a North Korean attack were still visceral reactions for most people. Home to a quarter of the nation's population, the city of Seoul was singularly vulnerable to artillery attack from North Korean forces massed only thirty to forty miles to the north. With rare complaint, Koreans accepted universal conscription of males for thirty months of military service, spent 5 to 6 percent of GDP on defense, put up with a toughly enforced midnight curfew, and half-accepted Park's dubious argument that his intolerant rule was necessitated by North Korean behavior. Through aggressive actions, North Korea periodically reminded South Koreans that the threat was real.

The United States was thoroughly engaged in Korea. Tracing back to the Korean War and reflecting the current reality of a hostile regime in North Korea, the United States in 1979 still maintained a major military presence in South Korea (39,000 soldiers and airmen) and retained operational command of all forces—Korean as well as U.S.—deployed for defense against an attack from the north. Although all American economic aid had been terminated, the United States provided modest amounts of concessional credit for military purchases, American banks satisfied a large portion of Korea's foreign capital needs, and the American market was critically important to the growth of Korea's export economy. These factors, together with extensive educational, religious, and cultural interaction between the two countries, constituted a complex web of relationships that entangled the United States with Korea and, at least potentially, constituted a powerful American influence on the peninsula. This did not, however, signify power to change the course of domestic developments in Korea.

U.S. relations with Korea, while basically friendly and cooperative, were marked by periodic strain and feistiness. Americans were generally responsive to Korea's concerns, and Koreans were demonstratively grateful for America's protection and other assistance. Yet there were also tensions and resentments. Many Americans, including those of us in the U.S. govern-

ment, assumed that we had the right to provide a wide range of advice to improve the process of governance in Korea. Koreans sometimes reacted nationalistically to this, rarely yielding to American pressure on domestic political matters. When Koreans spoke of Korea and the United States as two brothers, they were often insinuating that the United States, the elder brother, was domineering. This was, of course, far more characteristic of government supporters than of opposition elements, who tended to welcome—even seek—U.S. intervention.

Park Chung Hee's assassination in 1979 by one of his trusted insiders exposed the U.S. government to new tensions and difficult choices. At the early stages we could not predict the nature of the regime that would ultimately replace Park. We knew that the assassination was not caused by a revolution from below; the existing establishment, dominated by individuals with military and security experience, remained in place. The violent disruption at the top, however, triggered contention over the country's leadership and political agenda. The struggle lasted about a year, marked by abrupt and unexpected turns, by excesses and violence on both sides of the political fence, by unrealistic hopes (including mine), and finally by crude repression.

From the beginning we realized we were in for a period of confusion and uncertainty. We also suspected that the Korean army might intervene at some point, although we (or at least I) assumed incorrectly that the intervention would most likely occur in response to a mass protest movement. In the first months following Park's death, the United States adopted a relatively interventionist posture, actively encouraging—even pushing—Korea's interim leaders toward a more liberal political regime. Major General Chun Doo Hwan's sudden seizure of power within the army on December 12, 1979, did not immediately blight all prospects of democratic reform, but it radically altered expectations about who would dominate the political scene. Chun's progressive assumption of political power, very pronounced by April 1980, profoundly depressed political moderates and fueled radical protest among students and workers, culminating in the May 17, 1980, declaration of emergency martial law throughout the country and an exercise in brutality in Kwangju that provoked citizens to rebel in a massive uprising. Along with many Koreans, the United States was deeply discouraged by these events, which resulted in a new regime no less harsh than the one Park had imposed on Koreans during his final years.

If only because of command relationships, Koreans often held the United States complicitous in developments, such as the Kwangju tragedy, in which we were not involved. In fact, we were often handicapped severely by lack of

information and effective means of control. Our eagerness to push Korea in the direction of political liberalization, along with our propensity to publicize these efforts, left many Koreans frustrated and critical of us when liberal reform failed to occur and authoritarian control was reestablished with General Chun's assumption of the presidency.

Even though we did it grudgingly, the United States gradually accommodated itself during this tumultuous period to what amounted to a phased coup d'état by an ambitious military leader. Our responses were generally to take conservative measures to control damage rather than to impose radical sanctions on the new authorities. We judged sanctions as too dangerous to use. In particular, we feared that major military sanctions would risk North Korean exploitation, while economic ones would injure the entire Korean populace. We were also constrained by the innate conservatism of President Choi Kyu Ha, the interim constitutional leader, as well as by the unwillingness of any major group within Korean society (except perhaps some of the students) to risk a direct challenge to the newly emerging center of power.

Misperceptions of the U.S. role during this period, especially in the Kwangju crisis, were fed by mischievous distortion of facts on the part of the ruling authorities as well as by ill-informed folklore in some sectors of Korean society. Combined with our eventual acceptance of the reality of Chun's rule, these misperceptions generated substantial controversy in Korea, persisting for many years in the region around Kwangju. In the newly free atmosphere after the first democratic presidential election in 1987, the Korean National Assembly held hearings on the December 12 incident and the Kwangju crisis. The U.S. government provided the assembly with an authoritative statement summarizing U.S. actions, which was received with more objectivity than previous efforts to defend America's actions.¹ Although General John A. Wickham Jr., commander in chief, U.S. Forces, Korea, in 1979–82, and I contributed to preparation of this report, I continued to feel that, as one of the principal Americans entangled in these events, I needed to write a more personal, more thorough account of American perceptions, actions, and motives. This book represents my effort to fulfill that historical obligation.

1. On November 21, 1988, the investigating committee of the Korean National Assembly requested that General Wickham and I appear before them. Although we had to decline because of the diplomatic precedent involved, the State Department agreed to compile an authoritative statement, including answers to questions posed by the committee. The resulting report, "United States Government Statement on the Events in Kwangju, Republic of Korea, in May 1980," was transmitted to the Koreans and released to the press on June 19, 1989.

The book begins with a review of strained U.S.-Korean relations in the mid-1970s, discusses the severe aggravation of this strain by President Carter's troop withdrawal and human rights policies during the first two years of his administration, and then turns to the tumultuous events following President Park's assassination. For chapters 2 and 3, I have drawn on my experience as a deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific and senior staff member of the National Security Council for East Asia (1974–78). For chapters 4–11, I have reinforced vivid memories with the extensive records I kept throughout my assignment to Seoul (June 1978–July 1981). As the senior U.S. official in Korea, I was directly involved in almost all the major events of this period, sometimes as the only American present.

Internal Struggle Followed by Coherence in American Policy

From the beginning of the Carter administration in 1977 until mid-1979, the conduct of American policy toward Korea was encumbered by fundamental opposition within the bureaucracy (both civilian and military) and the Congress (both Republicans and Democrats) to the president's effort to withdraw all U.S. ground forces from Korea. Despite this enormous handicap, the policymaking community in Washington and Seoul functioned rather impressively. The secretaries of state and defense as well as the national security adviser kept themselves well informed about Korea, and their formal machinery for making decisions was usefully supplemented—sometimes obviated—by the East Asia Informal Group, created by assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, Richard C. Holbrooke, to develop consensus on both policy and operating problems in East Asia. Members of this weekly gathering at the level of assistant secretary and deputy assistant secretary were chosen for their influence as key aides to the leaders of the State Department, Defense Department (both Secretary Brown's staff and the Joint Chiefs of Staff), National Security Council, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and occasionally other organizations. The group normally met every Monday afternoon in Holbrooke's office to address a very fluid agenda. Since members had ready access to the top, they often were able to short-circuit bureaucratic obstructions. This efficiency and the group's easygoing working style made it an ideal forum in which to monitor a drawn-out crisis such as the one in Korea. The relationships that I, for example, developed in Washington while a member of this remarkable group served me well in Seoul. Equally important, in Seoul our country team of senior

Americans was both effective and exceptionally cooperative. Although luck played a part in the personal qualities of those around me, the cooperative spirit was not simply a matter of good fortune. All of us were aware that, in the past, U.S. policy had sometimes been disadvantaged by rivalry within the American ranks, particularly between proud ambassadors and powerful U.S. commanders in chief of the military. We worked hard to keep such distractions to a minimum.

By the time of Park's assassination in October 1979, the issue of troop withdrawals was no longer an impediment in the conduct of our policy. Events elsewhere also eased some of the other constraints complicating our dealings with Korea. Preoccupied by the crisis in Iran, President Carter now was concerned with preserving stability among allies as well as more cautious in his pursuit of human rights objectives. From my vantage point in Seoul, I credited this shift in the global strategic environment with responsibility for bringing a new coherence to our management of the Korean crisis of 1979–80. In any event, the degree of cooperation and coordination that took place in the later phases of the Carter administration was remarkable. Despite my earlier friction with President Carter over the troop question and human rights problems, during this later period I counted on Washington's support for what I felt we needed to do. I felt free to register dissent, and I knew my opinions were carefully considered at high levels, if need be by the president himself. In short, we had gone from an extremely contentious environment in Washington to one that facilitated the making of intelligent decisions.

Lessons for Korea and Perhaps Other Countries

The following chapters of this book examine what the United States did, and did not do, at each juncture of the Korean crisis and explain why. While the account confirms the good intentions of the United States, it also demonstrates how our troop withdrawal policy, our human rights efforts, and our other actions sometimes had unintended effects that worked against our basic interests in Korea. It also highlights the severe problems of operating with incomplete intelligence, the dilemmas associated with efforts to use military and economic power, the frustration of dealing with foreign authorities who virtually monopolize the power to communicate with the local populace, and the way such authorities can manipulate information to distort reality and, in this particular instance, to damage the American image.

Granting that I am not a disinterested observer, I would give the U.S. government a much higher grade for policy toward Korea after President Park's death than during the period of strain preceding it. In the period following his assassination, I believe we coped sensibly with a difficult situation. Even with the advantage of hindsight, I would not significantly revise the decisions we made twenty years ago. Although the crisis occurred during unusual circumstances in a somewhat exceptional country, I am convinced that the lessons learned still have relevance for American behavior toward Korea and perhaps toward other countries important to the United States.