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Directorate of Intelligence



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Factors Driving North Korea's Behavior

An Intelligence Assessment



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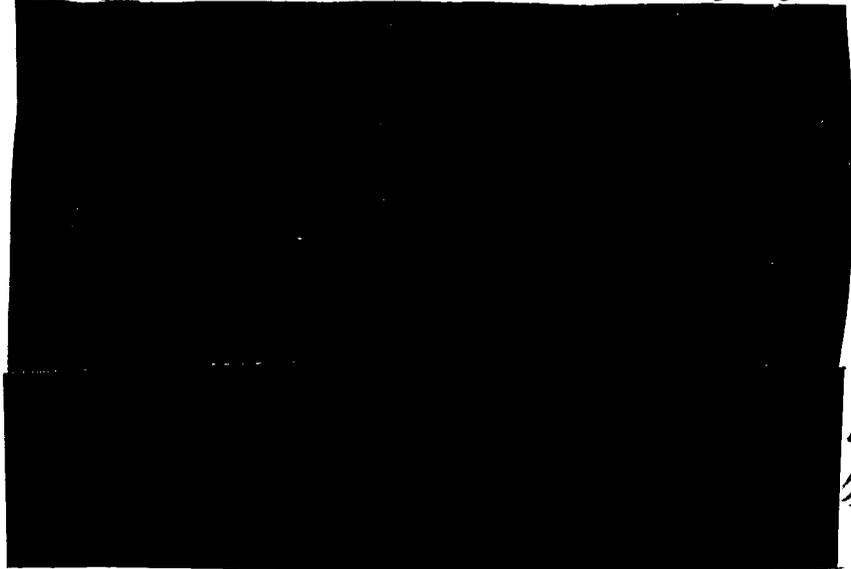
March 1984

Factors Driving North Korea's Behavior

Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 2 March 1984
was used in this report.*

North Korea's single, unswerving goal over the past three decades has been reunification of the Peninsula on its own terms. We see no evidence that P'yongyang has softened its position on this issue or is considering doing so.



The Rangoon bombing and the nearly simultaneous push for talks with the United States and South Korea are not, in our opinion, evidence of a radical shift in North Korean strategy. Behind both we see a certain logic and consistent effort to reverse a negative drift of events and to advance P'yongyang's unchanged objectives:

- The Rangoon bombing, had it succeeded, would have eliminated the man who personified the South's political and economic successes and its improved security ties with the United States.
- The talks initiative, in our view, is calculated primarily to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul and to register North Korean interests as clearly as possible in any great-power discussions on Korea.

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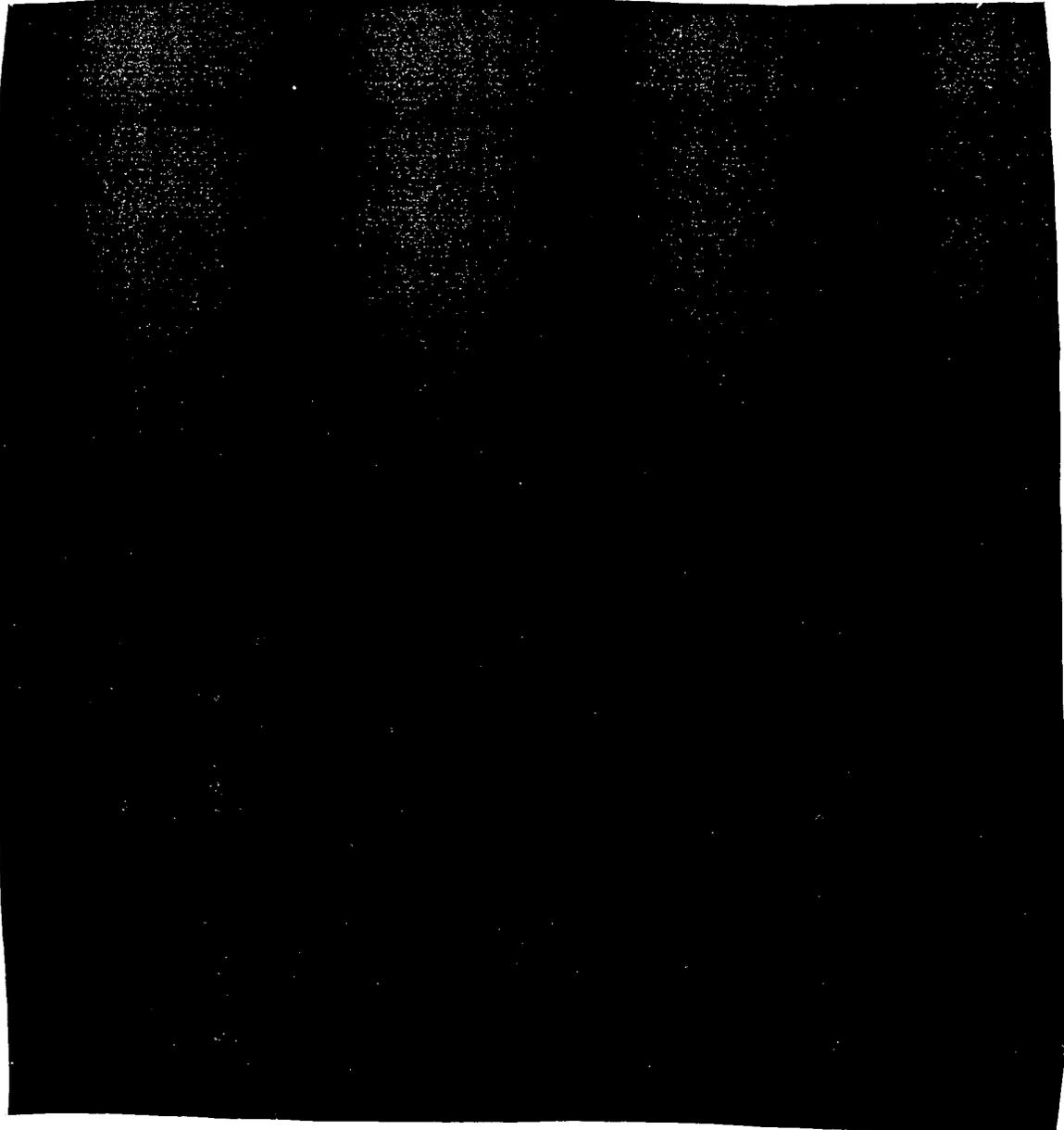
Throughout this year we expect P'yongyang to press its propaganda offensive on the talks issue. We believe, however, that trends will continue to work against P'yongyang, resulting in a more isolated and frustrated leadership whose willingness to take risks will increase. The year or two leading up to the summer Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988 could be a particularly dangerous time. We cannot rule out other North Korean terrorist or subversive acts in the more immediate future to capitalize on a unique opportunity such as that presented in Rangoon. In sum, the outlook is for a more uncertain—and hence dangerous—period on the Korean Peninsula.

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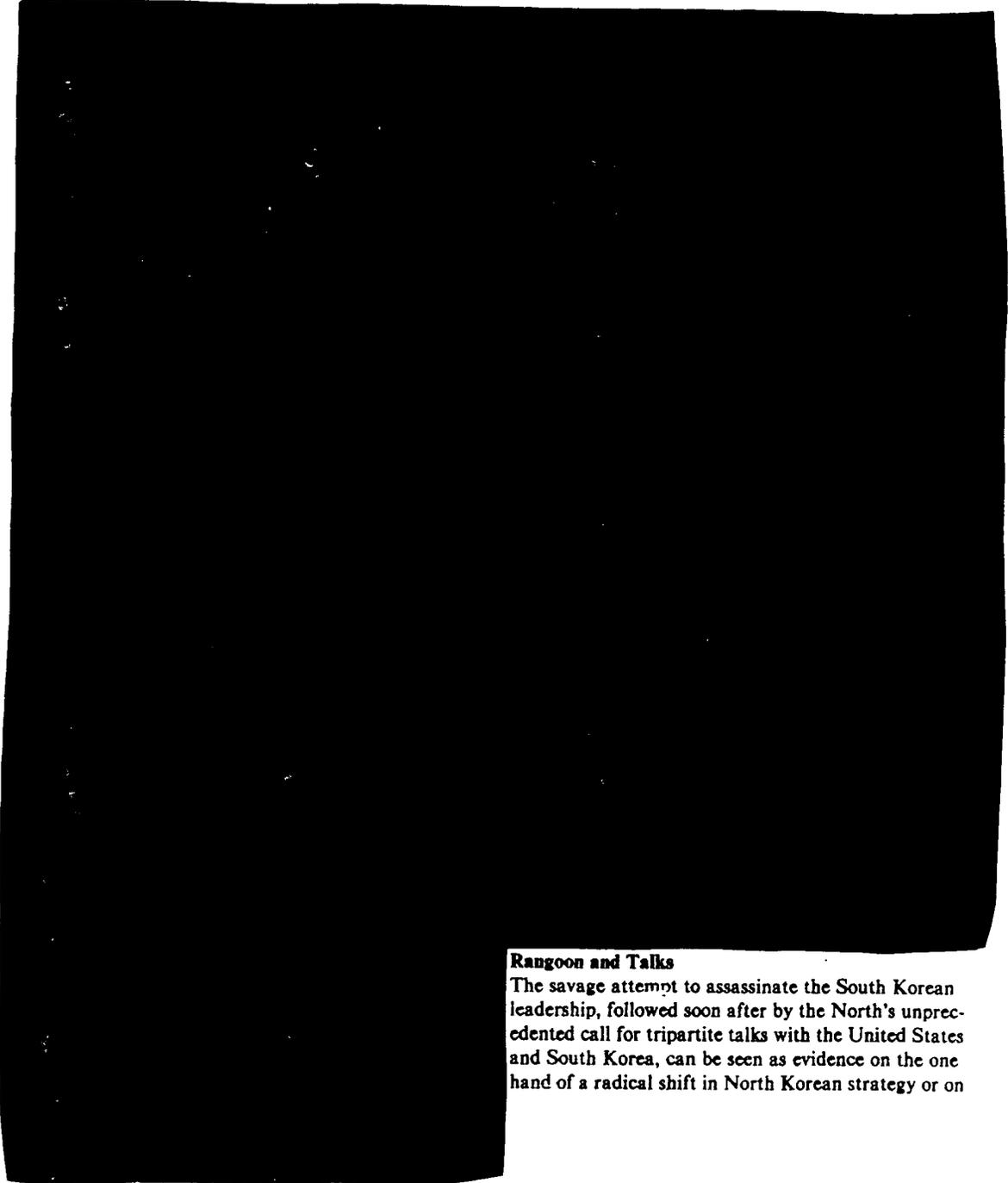


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Rangoon and Talks

The savage attempt to assassinate the South Korean leadership, followed soon after by the North's unprecedented call for tripartite talks with the United States and South Korea, can be seen as evidence on the one hand of a radical shift in North Korean strategy or on

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Burmese Martyr's Mausoleum, site of the North Korean assassination attempt on President Chun, October 1983. [REDACTED]



Korean Overseas Information Service

the other of a certain irrationality operating in P'yongyang. Both interpretations, in our view, are false. Beneath the apparent contradiction of the Rangoon bombing and the talks, we see a certain logic and a consistent effort by P'yongyang to reverse the negative drift of developments.

In the case of Rangoon, we believe the North Koreans were acting on an opportunity to eliminate the one leader most responsible for South Korea's recent political and economic successes and its improved security ties with the United States. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The North probably hoped to create a leadership vacuum in the South and to exploit any domestic unrest that ensued. P'yongyang clearly also hoped that its hand in the Rangoon bombing could remain hidden—at least to the point of maintaining "plausible denial."

The North's simultaneous push for trilateral talks, in our view, is a product of the same goals and thinking that produced the Rangoon bombing. It is conceivable to us that, well in advance of Rangoon, the North Koreans had surfaced the talks strategy with the Chinese.¹ In any case, P'yongyang's public call for

[REDACTED] The driving force behind Kim's reunification goal has been self-reliance, or "chuche," a personal characteristic that he has developed into an elaborate state ideology. We know that in North Korea's case, this is not a matter of mere words—witness Kim's costly, yet continued, efforts over the past decade and more to build an independent war-making capability. More than any other measure, this military buildup illustrates his desire to preserve his independence.

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North and South Korean negotiators meeting at Panmunjom in 1972.

trilateral discussions was designed, in part, to undo some of the damage to the North's image as a result of the Rangoon bombing. But beyond this, it strikes us that the North Koreans also may have had several additional tactical objectives in mind:

- P'yongyang's current stress on negotiations seems directed at sowing discord between Washington and Seoul over how to respond. The North undoubtedly perceives that Seoul is reluctant to be a party to talks in which the United States would remain the North's primary interlocutor.
- The North has characterized its proposal as an initiative for 1984—an indication that P'yongyang may hope it can make Korean policy an issue in the US Presidential elections.
- Beyond seeking to destabilize the US-South Korean relationship, P'yongyang appears to be attempting to frame the boundaries of any Sino-US discussions on Korea by publicizing its own interests as clearly as possible at the outset. Indeed, North Korea went public with its proposal on 10 January, the day Chinese Premier Zhao began an official visit to Washington.

Implications

For the remainder of this year, we expect P'yongyang to be on relatively good behavior. North Korea's proposal for tripartite talks will not run its course until the North has had more time to gauge the results. From the North's perspective, the initiative already has produced some positive interim benefit by deflecting attention from Rangoon and by putting Seoul somewhat on the defensive.

P'yongyang has not relaxed its harsh criticism of President Chun, but the North continues to stress its peaceful intentions and has moderated its invective against the United States.

Given the Rangoon incident, P'yongyang may feel it has some fences to mend.

But as we have argued already, the North has little difficulty in pursuing sudden tactical shifts between diplomacy and brutality. A unique opportunity, such as that provided by President Chun's visit to Rangoon, could produce another such shift—even over the short term.

In our view, the risk of such a dramatic return to terrorism and subversion increases with time. We believe the negative trends that threaten North Korea's goal of reunification are likely to persist and that P'yongyang will continue to look for new opportunities to reverse them. Seoul's rising international stature may be the factor that most grates on the North Korean psyche.

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We believe the year or two leading up to the summer Olympic Games in Seoul in 1988 could be a particularly dangerous period. For one thing, the political climate as the South heads for a leadership transition in 1988 is likely to be more fluid than it is today, and this will make the South a more attractive target for North Korean destabilization efforts. P'yongyang will also want to discourage participation in the Olympics and, in our opinion, will use whatever means necessary—particularly sabotage and acts of terrorism—to convince the world that Seoul is not a safe venue.

The bottom line here is that we are far more impressed with the potential for aggressive action by the North, such as we saw in Rangoon, through the remainder of this decade than we are with the prospects for significant changes in North Korean objectives and strategy.



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