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The Likelihood of Major Hostilities in Korea

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Concurred in by the

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THE LIKELIHOOD OF MAJOR HOSTILITIES IN KOREA

CONCLUSIONS

A. We believe that, under present circumstances, Pyongyang does not intend to invade South Korea. Nor do we believe that, at least for the next year or so, Pyongyang will take actions that it considers involve high risk of provoking a new Korean War.

B. We do believe, however, that Pyongyang is engaged in a determined effort to apply its own version of the doctrine of "peoples' war": to provoke incidents along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and to carry out terrorist attacks throughout the South in hopes of creating a situation which would, in time, shake the ROK Government's control of the nation.

C. Pyongyang might be tempted to go well beyond incidents along the DMZ; e.g., it might attempt to seize and hold a piece of territory south of the DMZ or stage a raid into South Korea with fairly large forces. In general, however, we believe that Pyongyang would consider such moves too risky, especially any attempt to hold South Korean territory.

D. Hence, in the short term, the principal danger is that of miscalculation; i.e., that the North Koreans will press so hard that Seoul will order large-scale retaliation. In this case, Pyongyang would be likely to respond with commensurate force, and there would be an increasing chance of escalation into major hostilities.

DISCUSSION

1. The seizure of the *Pueblo* and the attack on the presidential mansion in Seoul, both in late January 1968, were followed by a period of relative quiet. Since mid-April, however, North Korean harassment and infiltration in the area of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) has intensified, and it appears that saboteurs have again been active in Seoul. With the advent of favorable weather, we expect guerrilla teams to begin moving down the coasts of South Korea in a

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renewed effort to establish bases in the mountainous hinterland. On the propaganda front, the bellicose line adopted by North Korean Premier Kim Il-song at the October 1966 Korean Labor Party Conference has been maintained, with somewhat greater truculence since the *Pueblo* incident. It is apparent, therefore, that we are entering another cycle of North Korea's campaign of violence and intimidation against the ROK.

2. We have reviewed the available evidence and concluded once again that, under present circumstances, Pyongyang does not intend to invade South Korea. Nor do we believe that, at least for the next year or so, Pyongyang will take actions that it considers involve high risk of provoking a new Korean War. This judgment rests in part on our view of how North Korea would assess its prospects in a new war. Despite the emphasis on modernizing its armed forces, on training reserves and increasing local militia, and on the protection of key installations against air attack, Pyongyang almost certainly would not expect to overrun South Korea or to escape serious damage in the North. The ROK Army is superior in numbers; Pyongyang would almost certainly consider that the presence of US forces virtually assured their participation and their reinforcement if necessary; and North Korea itself would require material support, and probably manpower, from China or the USSR.¹ Thus, any plans for a deliberate attack leading to a renewal of the Korean War would require the assurance of support from the USSR, China, or both. Under present circumstances, it is extremely doubtful that Pyongyang would receive any assurances in advance from either Communist power that the support required for a large-scale conflict in South Korea would be available.

3. More directly, we do not see indications of preparations of the nature and scope we would expect to see if North Korea were planning war or expected it in the near future. There is, for example, no evidence—in this nation of chronic shortages—of unusually large imports of food or medicines, or other unusual international transactions. There have been rumors of increased draft calls, mobilization of reserves, unusual troop movements and deployments, and the buildup of stockpiles near the DMZ, but none of these or similar indicators of impending large-scale action are supported by reliable evidence. The “war is coming” tone of letters from North Korea to Japan appears to reflect official propaganda; such letters almost certainly suit the regime's purposes since all outgoing mail is carefully censored. Finally, if North Korea were planning a surprise attack, it would seem unwise to foment tension and keep the ROK and the US on the alert.

4. Nor do we believe that the North Koreans are trying to provoke the ROK into a resumption of major hostilities. Pyongyang might hope thus to activate its defense treaties with China and the USSR, and also to avoid condemnation by world opinion. But we do not believe that the North Korean leaders would expect either the USSR or Communist China to cooperate in a “counterattack” that could overrun the South.

¹ See Annex: North and South Korean Forces.

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5. We do believe, however, that Pyongyang is engaged in a determined effort to create the conditions for a "peoples' war" in South Korea. We also believe that Pyongyang currently rates the risks of this enterprise as not very high. The North Koreans probably view the US involvement in Vietnam and the resultant discord in the US as limiting the military capabilities and the will of the US to support any serious ROK retaliatory ventures against the North. US restraint in the *Pueblo* affair probably strengthened this view, and North Korean intelligence probably has a reasonably accurate picture of Washington's pressures on the ROK to forgo strong retaliatory measures in the Blue House and other affairs.

6. Thus, Pyongyang probably feels reasonably safe in creating incidents along the DMZ and in carrying out terrorist attacks throughout South Korea. These serve to give some credence at home to its claims of "imperialist aggression" and a developing resistance movement in the South. Pyongyang also intends them to embarrass and distract the ROK Government and to cause a loss of confidence in its leaders which could, in time, loosen their control of the nation. Meanwhile, these actions have caused some misunderstanding and strains between the ROK and the US.

7. Pyongyang might be tempted to go well beyond incidents along the DMZ. It might, for example, attempt to seize and hold a piece of territory south of the DMZ or stage a raid into South Korea with fairly large forces. We do not entirely rule out such actions. They would depend on how Pyongyang judged the probable reactions of the US and ROK. In general, however, we believe that Pyongyang would consider such moves as too risky, especially any attempt to hold South Korean territory.

8. Kim's present course of action vis-a-vis South Korea dates from 1966, although some indications of long-range preparations for intensified action were visible earlier. After several years of economic difficulty at home and consistent failure to capitalize on political unrest in the South, the frustrated Kim attempted to inject some dynamism into his regime by securing tighter control over the government and driving the population to greater efforts in its behalf. He seems to have succeeded in pruning much of what he considered deadwood from the government, the party, the military, and the economy; a series of low-keyed purges has reduced his leadership group to a handful of trusted comrades; and Kim has demanded and is receiving personal adulation on an unprecedented scale.

9. Public participation in the regime's many new programs has been fostered (along with acceptance of hardships) by nationalistic exhortations to prepare for "the foremost revolutionary task"—i.e., a Communist takeover of the South and reunification on Pyongyang's terms. In Kim's doctrine, the success of the revolutionary struggle in the South requires parallel efforts to build up the revolutionary base in the North, to improve its economy so that it will impress the southerners, and to strengthen its defense against the day when reactionary forces in the South, in desperation, strike northward. It is apparent that to make this line credible requires, at a minimum, some evidence of revolutionary struggle in the South and a demonstrably aggressive enemy along the DMZ. War tensions

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apparently prevailing among the northerners are evidence that the regime has achieved some degree of success in its indoctrination program.

10. This does not mean that North Korea will be satisfied with the mere semblance of a revolution in the South. Pyongyang's violent actions in 1967, coupled with its longstanding campaign of political subversion in South Korea, attest to the seriousness of its purpose. But Pyongyang probably has little expectation of developing a revolutionary movement in the South in the near term. North Korean theoreticians tend to emphasize the inadequate basis for revolutionary action in the South and the time and energy required to develop one. Thus, the leadership probably views its current efforts as part of a long-term campaign to upset the political equilibrium in the South, meanwhile strengthening in some measure the existing Communist clandestine apparatus there.

11. It is possible that North Korean leaders have persuaded themselves that political and military conditions in the US and in Korea, as well as in Vietnam, make this year the best time for a radical intensification of this revolutionary strategy. In our view, however, North Korea is not committed to any particular sequence of moves nor to any firm timetable. Pyongyang's propaganda, in contrast to the statements of captured North Korean infiltrators, has invariably been vague on timing; the phrase most frequently used is "within our generation." The North Korean plan of action appears similarly flexible; ROK and US defense measures and other responses, and the demonstrated effectiveness of various types of North Korean operations are the prime considerations. At any rate, to serve Pyongyang's current strategy, the campaign of violence need only continue; there seems to be no requirement for escalation to the level of major hostilities.

12. In this situation, the principal danger in the short term is one of miscalculation—i.e., that North Korea, in the process of probing ROK and US resolve, will overplay its hand and that an increasingly exasperated President Pak will order large-scale retaliation. Pyongyang's response in this situation would be difficult to predict with any degree of confidence. On the one hand, the North Koreans might feel that they had to accept the ROK retaliation because, at this juncture, the risk of major hostilities would seem too high. It seems more likely, however, that they would feel compelled to respond with commensurate force. Though North Korea would probably stop short of actions certain to provoke a full-scale war, the proximity of hostile armies would make the situation highly volatile and war could result.

13. In such a crisis, decisions in Pyongyang and Seoul on any further moves would probably be affected, and perhaps decisively, by the attitudes and advice of their major allies. In our view, neither the USSR nor Communist China would consider a war in Korea to be in its interest. Without flatly refusing Pyongyang all military support, they would probably encourage North Korea to limit hostilities.

14. *The Longer Term.* In any case, a tense and risky situation is likely to continue in Korea well beyond the one year period of this estimate. Kim Il-song

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is a relatively young man; he appears to be in firm control in the North; and his hard-line views are likely to hold sway there for many years. Of critical importance will be the ability of the ROK people over the years to stand united against Communist subversion, and the ability of ROK forces to cope effectively with North Korean harassments. ROK confidence in the face of these long-term threats will depend heavily on the US posture in the Far East.

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ANNEX

NORTH AND SOUTH KOREAN FORCES

1. The North Korean Army has a strength of about 345,000. It is probably at full strength, with a larger proportion in combat units than US/ROK forces have. North Korean troops are disciplined, highly trained, and alert. By their standards they are probably combat-ready. We do not know to what extent, if any, their heavy ground equipment is currently being replaced or augmented by the Soviets. With the exception of assault rifles and some new rockets, Soviet-designed weapons of World War II continue to predominate. Present stockpiles appear sufficient to support offensive action for at least a month.

2. The South Korean Army has some 532,000 personnel and the marine force numbers about 31,500. Of the total forces, some 50,000 are in Vietnam. ROK units are limited by old equipment, shortages of spare parts, and very austere supply levels. The two US divisions in Korea are under strength and not rated as having attained combat-ready status.

3. On balance, we estimate that neither side has the ability to conduct a sustained attack (i.e., for six months) or achieve a decisive advantage without substantial outside logistical support.

4. The North Korean Air Force could provide a strong defense against air attack. It has some 450 jet fighters—380 Mig-15/17s, 7 Mig-19s, and at least 60 Mig-21s. Almost all of the Mig-21s have probably been delivered over the past two years. Over the past three years, the number of surface-to-air missile (SA-2) sites has increased from 2 to 20. There are also 80 IL-28 jet light bombers, which, with its fighters, provide North Korea an offensive capability unmatched by the ROK Air Force. The ROKs have about 200 fighter aircraft, predominantly F-86s, but about 60 F-5 supersonic fighters have been introduced. The ROK Air Force has been heavily reinforced since the *Pueblo* incident by the basing of some 150 US supersonic jet fighters in South Korea.

5. The North Korean Navy is essentially a coastal patrol and inshore defense force. Its main offensive strength includes at least 4 "W"-class submarines, at least 7 "Komar"-class guided missile boats and associated Styx missiles, and 3 "Shershen"-class fast patrol boats. The "Komars" and "Shershens" have probably been provided by the USSR over the past two years or so. North Korea also has 39 other motor torpedo boats, and there are at least 2 cruise missile coastal defense complexes. The ROK Navy is also primarily a coastal patrol force; it has about 60 ships, including 4 destroyer types, 6 fast attack transports, 10 minesweepers, 20 patrol ships, and 20 amphibious ships.

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