



Director of
Central
Intelligence

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North Korean Reactions to Instability in the South

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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NORTH KOREAN REACTIONS TO
INSTABILITY IN THE SOUTH

Information available as of 20 December 1979 was
used in the preparation of this Estimate.

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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS, EXCEPT AS NOTED IN THE TEXT.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency.

Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

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NOTE

This contingency estimate addresses the likelihood of a North Korean attack on the South if severe fighting between South Korean military factions and widespread civil disorders develop there during the next two or three months. It assumes a level of instability which may not develop.

KEY JUDGMENTS

The emergence of fighting between South Korean military factions and widespread civil disorders in South Korea would prompt Pyongyang to consider forceful reunification of the peninsula.

However, Pyongyang would face a crucial imponderable in attempting to determine the US response to a North Korean attack, given the presence of US ground forces in the South and the virtual certainty of their being engaged. With the

[redacted] United States preoccupied with events in Iran and possibly elsewhere, the North would probably calculate that US capability and resolve to defend South Korea had been weakened.

In view of the magnitude of the decision facing Pyongyang and the risk involved, we cannot judge with confidence whether or not it would opt for military action. We believe, however, that the chances of such action could be as high as 50-50 under this scenario.*

If the North should decide to intervene, it would most probably launch a massive assault designed to destroy organized resistance and consolidate its control over the South.

* The Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, believes it impossible to calculate odds in circumstances that demand so many subjective judgments, including North Korea's perception of the risk of war with the United States and loss of so much of the progress of which North Koreans are so proud.

He agrees, however, that there would be a significantly higher risk of hostilities.

DISCUSSION

1. North Korean President Kim Il-song would view the emergence of fighting between South Korean military factions and widespread civil disorders in the wake of South Korean President Park's death as a unique opportunity to reunify the Korean Peninsula on his terms. In 1975, Kim publicly declared that the North would not stand idly by if "revolutionary conditions" developed in the South, a sentiment that Pyongyang has subsequently publicized. Privately, Kim has described the unsettled period between the resignation of Syngman Rhee in 1960 and the military coup in 1961 as a golden opportunity that the North was militarily unprepared to exploit. Given the significant expansion of North Korean military capabilities over the past decade, Kim is now in far better position to take such action.

The Deterrent

2. In considering an attack on a militarily weakened South Korea, Pyongyang would weigh the attitudes of its major allies and, most importantly, the US security commitment to Seoul. For years, Moscow and Beijing have cautioned Kim, but their influence has decreased as the North's military self-sufficiency has grown. If Kim were otherwise convinced that military intervention were in his interest, it is doubtful that China or the USSR could veto the venture.

3. We judge that North Korea would attack the South if there were no US military presence. The presence of US ground forces, however, and the virtual certainty of their being engaged during any sizable North Korean assault must give Pyongyang pause. The North has long recognized that the presence of US infantry north of Seoul is a deterrent above and beyond the US treaty commitment to South Korea. We continue to believe that one of Pyongyang's key objectives throughout the 1970s has been to end the US troop presence in the South.

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5. The North would also consider US concerns and involvement outside Korea. It might perceive current US preoccupation in the Middle East and Southeast Asia as a factor that would decrease its degree of risk in taking military action. On the other hand, Pyongyang might consider US frustration and anger over the Iranian situation and evidence of a renewed mood of American assertiveness as ominous indicators of Washington's willingness to respond to an attack on US forces in Korea. The North would also assess US ability to respond rapidly. If the United States were to become militarily involved elsewhere in a major way, we would expect the North to see the degree of risk substantially reduced. A key indicator for Pyongyang would be the continued presence of US forces in Korea and elsewhere in Northeast Asia, or earmarked for use there.

6. In view of the magnitude of the decision facing Pyongyang and the risk involved, we cannot judge with confidence whether or not it would opt for an all-out assault. We believe, however, that the chances of such action could be as high as 50-50.*

Military Options

7. Pyongyang might consider either: (1) some form of limited military intervention that would minimize risks, test US resolve, and add to the process of disintegration in the South, or (2) launching a major offensive. We believe that Pyongyang would reject the first course. Since the Korean war, the North has tried a wide variety of lesser measures with little success. In view of those experiences, the North might well calculate that limited action would be a net loss. US and South Korean forces might not accurately gauge the North's limited objectives; if so, the North's risks would not be lessened. In the past, the assumption of a menacing posture by the North has had a unifying effect upon the South, and Pyongyang would have little reason to judge otherwise this time. Finally, measured North Korean military action would yield limited gains at best, and yet could help to suspend US troop withdrawals indefinitely.

8. Thus we believe that North Korean military intervention would likely take the form of a large-scale, coordinated ground, naval, and air assault against the South.

* See footnote on page 1 in the Key Judgments for comment of the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency.

[REDACTED]

9. Although control of the Seoul area would be an initial objective, we believe that the North's ultimate goal would be the unification of the entire peninsula through military conquest.

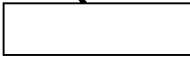
[REDACTED]

10. In our view, North Korea would attempt to continue the invasion and to consolidate control over the South as long as its military operations were successful. The North's increased numbers of military units, personnel, and equipment would permit sustained operations far longer than we considered possible even two years ago.

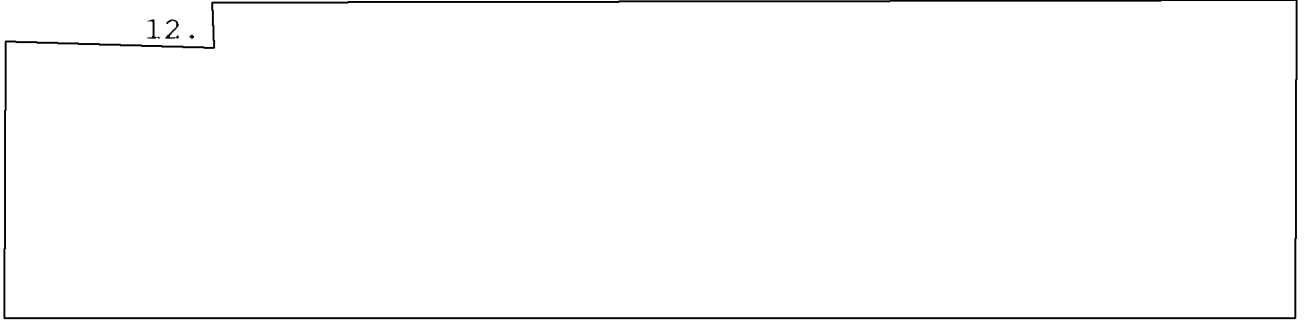
[REDACTED]

11. The USSR and China, as treaty allies of Pyongyang, almost certainly would respond cautiously to a North Korean attack on South Korea. Both would want to avoid a direct military confrontation with the United States; the Chinese in particular would be loath to jeopardize their developing relationship with the United States. Nonetheless, because of their mutual rivalry and the strategic importance of maintaining a nonhostile state in North Korea, the USSR and China would feel compelled to provide at least some material assistance to Pyongyang.

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