

March 4, 1968

GDR Embassy Letter to State Secretary Hegen

Citation:

"GDR Embassy Letter to State Secretary Hegen", March 4, 1968, Wilson Center Digital Archive, PolA AA, MfAA, G-A 360. Obtained by Bernd Schaefer for NKIDP and translated for NKIDP by Karen Riechert. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/114573>

Summary:

A wide-ranging report written by the East German Ambassador on the USS Pueblo Incident, inter-Korean relations, North Korean military and defense policies, the *juche* ideology, economic development in the DPRK, and North Korea's foreign relations.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

German

Contents:

Translation - English

GDR Embassy to DPRK
Pyongyang, 4 March 1968

State Secretary and
First Deputy of the Minister
of Foreign Affairs
Comrade H e g e n

102 B e r l i n
Marx Engels Square 2

Dear Comrade Hegen!

Following your written instructions of 30 January 1968 I today attempt to write down a summary of most relevant events and likely tendencies. For reasons of efficiency I have chosen to do this by way of a letter to you. Enclosed is the most important material drafted during recent weeks [Translator's note: enclosures are not part of this document]. I have left a copy of this letter in our embassy to provide our new ambassador, Comrade Henke with the opportunity to state his opinion after his arrival. As one copy is staying here, I arranged classification of the most important material as highly confidential or confidential matters.

On the "Pueblo" Question

So far negotiations in Panmunjeom are inconclusive with regard to the return of crew and ship. Yet currently it is very difficult to obtain exact information over the substance of negotiations. Apparently both participating sides have agreed to make nothing, or next to nothing, available to the public. Even the Polish and Czechoslovak comrades who have their representatives on site in Panmunjeom, and have so far briefed me regularly, do now encounter problems in following the course of negotiations. In recent days, attention is apparently mainly focused on General Park Jeong-guk's proposal to exchange the "Pueblo" crew against patriots imprisoned in South Korea. This proposal forwarded by members of the Neutral Commission is said to have met the interest of the United States. There are doubts, however, whether the South Korean side is willing to hand over prisoners to the U.S. for a swap with the DPRK. According to the Cuban Embassy here, the DPRK demanded among other things the extradition of the deputy editor-in-chief of the DPRK news agency [KCNA] who defected in spring of 1967, and the return of the Lieutenant from the Korean People's Army who was arrested during the Seoul events in January 1968. So far there is no confirmation of this information from any other side. Yet if the DPRK is really insisting on the extradition of these two, the U.S. will be in an uncomfortable position toward South Korea. The latter will be hardly willing to extradite the two, as their return to the DPRK would certainly lead to their retraction of everything they divulged in South Korea to possibly save their heads. It is noteworthy that General Park Jeong-guk indicated that a swap of the "Pueblo" crew against Korean patriots would not necessarily require a U.S. apology for the intrusion into DPRK territorial waters. This element increases the attractiveness of the proposal to the United States. Its floating seems to indicate that the DPRK will leave it to the U.S. to launch such a proposal by itself during an official meeting.

Judging from the course of negotiations so far, there is only a very slight probability left the "Pueblo" affair might lead to a heightening of tensions as an actual cause for a military conflict.

On the domestic situation in the DPRK

The most significant element of the current domestic situation in the DPRK is the creation, respectively fueling, of an all-out war psychosis among the population. Given their limited sources of information, average citizens must arrive at the conclusion that war is imminent in the very immediate future. Apparently there are discussions about this context in wide swaths of the population. The KWP central newspaper published an editorial piece on 27 February that responds in both direct and indirect form to those questions discussed by the people (see appendix 5 [not included]). Among other things, this article warns before an all-too-peaceful mood, as such would abandon the brothers and sisters in the South. At the same time, the piece provides a theoretic "reasoning" for the need for "self-defense in the defense of the country".

As our embassy has already reported on the organizational and technical preparations for war, as demonstrated daily to a public forced to participate in them on a broad scale, I limit myself to a condensed outline of major facts:

□□ certain points in the city access roads respectively accesses are being built to underground facilities of the "subway" under construction. We are not able to assess to what extent an underground system does already exist. It looks, however, as there are presently major efforts underway to expand current underground facilities and perfect them. The editorial piece from 27 February mentioned above also calls for the construction of defense facilities.

. Mobilization efforts are supposedly already completed. According to internal information we received, the ranks of the KPA [Korean People's Army] swelled by 200,000 to 250,000 men from their current strength of about 400,000 members (see here also appendix 6 [not included]).

. Rehearsals of air-raid alerts with partial or complete cutoff of electricity.

. Employees of our embassy have frequently observed how books, archival material and other things have been removed from public libraries, schools, archives, military offices and other administrative facilities.

. We have learned from foreign citizens living in Pyongyang that many Koreans living with them have received recommendations to travel to visit relatives in the countryside. The otherwise complicated procedural formalities tied to this kind of travel procedure have been supposedly simplified to a minimum.

. Already some weeks ago, leading officials and academics from several institutes of the Academy of Sciences and other research institutions have been supposedly evacuated from Pyongyang.

. Myself I was able to notice how blackout devices were assembled in several central offices, like at the Committee for Economic Relations with Foreign Countries.

. The instructions given to the embassies to build air raid shelters are also part of these measures.

. On 16 and 20 February respectively, the entire traffic was blocked between 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. for the main avenues since military columns were guided through the city. Prior to that, the embassies were informed about roadblocks for civilian vehicles. Moving through the city were T-54 tanks, modern Soviet armored personnel carriers, missiles on launching pads, gun artillery, maintenance trucks, trucks with mounted infantry, and others. Judging from the marching route of the armed units and others accompanying this display of military technology, it must be presumed this was primarily intended as a demonstration to the population.

. Frequent over-flights of the city by low-altitude fighter aircraft, and searchlight exercises in the evenings.

□□

All these measures are amplified through massive propaganda in the press, radio and in newspapers propagating the situation as so tense that an outbreak of war can be expected every day. The visit by Johnson's Special Envoy Cyrus Vance to South Korea is compared with the stay of [U.S. Foreign Minister John Foster] Dulles in South Korea

in 1950 at the eve of the Korean War. At the same time the necessity is always emphasized to complete the revolution in all of Korea, to liberate South Korea, and to evict the U.S. from there. Defense Minister Kim Jang-bong stated in his speech during the commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the Korean People's Army that the "Pueblo" incident and everything surrounding it demonstrates how "the maneuver by the U.S. imperialists to unleash a new war in Korea has reached the boiling point". He also declared how "the Korean people do not like to utter empty words and are strong-willed people to follow through by all means with words once spoken".

The above-mentioned editorial in the central newspaper organ from 27 February also attempts to dispel any potential doubts when it makes the assurance that the Korean people have already defeated the United States once. Kim Il Sung stated in his remarks at the reception for the 20th Anniversary of the Korean People's Army that its political-moral superiority provides the opportunity to defeat even an enemy which is better equipped technologically.

Foreign representatives here are always told how one obviously is unable to fathom what is going on in the heads of the American imperialists. Therefore one never knows when the war will start, but one has to face its possibility at any day. Yet an analysis of the facts we were able to obtain on U.S. positions shows that the Americans are currently not interested in a major armed conflict in Korea. This became especially evident in the context of Johnson's Special Envoy Vance's visit to South Korea (see here appendix 4 [not included]). There is agreement on this in the diplomatic corps here in Pyongyang, except for the Chinese and Albanian embassies to which opinions we are not privy.

Looking at all this, we are drawing the conclusion that all measures mentioned above must serve a different purpose in this case. It is somewhat hard to fathom that a communist party pursues this kind of intentions, yet it appears plausible to me that the DPRK is planning something by its own and views the time to have come for implementing the "great revolutionary event to unite the homeland". Appendix 8 [not included] contains a comparative analysis of segments from Kim Il Sung's speeches at the Party Conference in October 1966 and the meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly in December 1967 where he addresses the situation in South Korea and the solution to the national question. This analysis shows how the assignments to the 1966 Party Conference to develop revolutionary forces and create a revolutionary party in South Korea have changed in a major way. Today the emphasis is essentially on completing the revolution [in South Korea] from outside.

The comrades from the Czechoslovak mission in Panmunjeom and the embassy here in Pyongyang are quite frankly in their assessment that in due time - probably in the fall of 1968 - there will be an attempt by the DPRK to solve the national question through a military solution.

Some thoughts on the military part of this orientation are added in appendix 6 [not included]. In this vein I also refer to the same appendix for the translation of a statement by the South Korean news agency about the equipment of the Korean People's Army. So far we have not heard about this kind of documentation. Therefore it is very hard to evaluate the correctness of this information.

In the given context, the comparatively favorable international situation for such an assignment [of Korean military unification] deserves to be highlighted:

□□DPRK relations with the Soviet Union are fine thanks to the efforts by the Soviet comrades, even if the Korean leadership must be aware that the USSR will not support adventurist steps (see appendix 1 [not included]);

. Relations with the PR China seem to have slightly improved in recent months (see appendix 2 [not included]) although there must be probably no doubts that there are

still reservations held in the Korean leadership over the leadership presumption of the Mao Group;

. The U.S. aggression in Vietnam and the actions by the National Liberation Front [of South Vietnam] are tying up the major part of the American military potential in Asia;

. The economic development in South Korea and increased American military aid results in further strengthening the Park Chung Hee regime the longer it lasts.

□□

The once existing opposition line within the KWP leadership has been smashed. All the opponents of such a course [of military unification] in national policy have been removed from their influential positions.

The Korean party leadership is, of course, aware that such a course in national policy will not encounter the support of the majority of socialist countries. It [the leadership] has to take this into account. Therefore there have been some new nuances recently. They were most prevalent in the announcement by the DPRK Foreign Ministry from 27 February (text went to Far Eastern Department [of GDR Foreign Ministry]) when for the first time for a long while there was a reference to previous DPRK proposals about a peaceful solution of the national question. At the same time, it was stressed how the situation is very serious and the future course of events depends on the United States. Phrases like:

"In the past like in the present, the DPRK government has not changed in any way its basic policy directed towards the preservation of peace on Korea and the peaceful solution of the question of Korea's unification."

have not been heard for a while. The chief of the Political Main Administration [of the Korean People's Army], Army General O Jin-u, remarked to our military attaché in a conversation during a cocktail for the 12th Anniversary of the National People's Army [of the GDR] that the DPRK does not fear the United States but will never strike first to start a war.

We have to pay careful attention to these new nuances. Right now they rather sound like a new tactic to preempt increasing criticism from the socialist countries and to offer less flanks to the United States and South Korea in their propaganda against the DPRK. Whether we can derive from all that a basic change of course in national policy represents a question we cannot yet answer at this moment.

Concluding this chapter, we want to draw attention to the fact that developments in the DPRK unfold under the signature of Kim Il Sung's deification matched only by the cult surrounding Mao. Defense Minister Kim Jangbong said in his speech at the commemoration for the 20th Anniversary of the Korean People's Army:

"The unitary ideology of our party is the revolutionary ideology of Comrade Kim Il Sung. It is nurtured by the spirit of Juche in ideology, by independence of policy, self-reliance in the economy, and self-defense in defense of the country."

And he said at another point:

"Our Korean People's Army has solidly armored itself with the unitary ideology of our party. She is fiercely loyal only to the great revolutionary ideology of Comrade Kim Il Sung, our respected and beloved leader, and does not know of any other ideology."

Many other such examples could be listed easily.

On the Development of the Economy

Like during previous years, publications on this subject are so insufficient that it is impossible to derive from them a picture even approximately complete. In preparation for the material I include in the appendix, I asked the DPRK Foreign Ministry to help me schedule a consultation about economic development with the official organs responsible. Until today I have not received a response. Therefore the note in Appendix 3 is the only material our Embassy currently has concerning economic development in 1967. Listed numbers might be more or less correct, as they have been calculated, respectively estimated, by experts with solid country expertise. Yet it constitutes an essential deficit of these data that they do not reflect the actual existing process of the economy's militarization, a certain stagnation of the civilian sector, as well as the difficulties to maintain the modest living standards of the population. These three tendencies become ever more clear. If the current pattern of "parallel development of economy and defense" will be continued, it will result in further increase of already existing disproportions.

On Questions that might be asked from the Korean Side

[during an upcoming GDR politburo visit to Pyongyang in late March 1968]

The range of such questions is very broad. It includes the explanation of main elements of DPRK assessments pertaining to the current situation all over Asia and in Korea in particular. The main focus might be devoted to an emphasis of the possibility of the emergence of a new war in Korea. Simultaneously they will stress the need to unify the country and expel the United States. In this context, they will raise without doubt the necessity for unity among all socialist countries and all anti-imperialist forces. The argumentation will probably follow the line espoused towards our military delegation. Looking at the current actual situation, however, there will be stronger emphasis that the DPRK needs especially good relations with its two major neighbors.

[...] [bureaucratic reference to the 1967 report about the DPRK visit by a GDR military delegation.]

On economic matters it is likely that the Korean side is expecting answers to the following questions:

□□ Is there a chance the GDR might change its negative opinion concerning the delivery of an optical factory? (see conversation Li Juyeon - [GDR Ambassador] Brie, Confidential Letter Number 119/67).

. Is the GDR willing to fulfill DPRK requests concerning a factory for automation devices? (see the same letter and the final report from the VEB Inex delegation [GDR state company for export of industrial sites] visiting Pyongyang in December 1967).

. Maybe the Korean side will revive the question of whether to deliver a diesel engine factory, as they did already back in 1965.

. Is the GDR willing to deliver the desired equipment for a textile factory in context of the granted credit?

□□

On the DPRK Position towards the GDR

There have been no principal changes in DPRK attitudes towards the GDR during recent months. The main elements to determine the position were spelled out in our top secret letter B 7/10 - 33/67. They are still valid, yet the following facts must be taken into account:

□□□

. In Kim Il Sung's speech to welcome the government program in December 1967 there was no mention by even one word of any support for the GDR's fight against West German militarism (see confidential letter B 7/10 - 1/68, p. 11ff.).

. Publication of an article series by [at that time Moscow-critical Dutch communist party leader] Paul de Groot in the KWP central organ [Nodong Sinmun] containing an attack on SED and KPD [the West German communist party loyal to the GDR] (see our telegram No. 14/68).

. There has been so far not one single publication in the DPRK about the draft for a new socialist constitution in the GDR, despite major efforts by our Embassy to stimulate a Korean statement (see our telegram No. 52/68).

□□

Finally I want to inform that so far no reaction and no publication have reached us until today concerning the [communist and workers' parties] consultative meeting in Budapest. Neither the invitation, nor its decline by the KWP, nor the fact of the meeting at all, has been mentioned in the DPRK press. There exist only internal comments made to the Romanian delegation headed by [Romanian Communist Party Politburo Member] Comrade [Gheorghe] Apostol and towards [CPSU Central Committee Secretary] Comrade [Boris] Ponomarev, both about we have already reported.

Jarck
Acting Ambassador

Appendixes [not included]

- 1 - On Current State of USSR-DPRK relations (cosmic top secret)
- 2 - On Current State of USSR-PRC relations (top secret)
- 3 - Note on Economic Development in the DPRK 1967 (secret)
- 4 - Information on Vance Visit to South Korea (secret)
- 5 - Information on Editorial "Nodong Sinmun" 27 February 1968
- 6 - Assessment of National Defense (Cosmic Top Secret) (including translation of South Korean news report)
- 7 - Some remarks on Speech by Defense Minister, Army General Kim Chang Bong, at the 20th Anniversary of the Korean People's Army (Secret)
- 8 - On National Policy (Secret)