

June 4, 1968

Military-Political Situation in the DPRK

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Summary:

Despite tensions on the Korean Peninsula, the DPRK is calming down. Czechoslovak diplomats speculate what underlies the changes in DPRK tactics.

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To the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague

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Political Report No. 21

Re: No. 21 of the Work Plan Prepared by M. Holub

Following the temporary relative relaxation of tension on the Korean peninsula, which became particularly evident in March, a renewed deterioration of the situation was generally expected during the spring months. It was assumed that the political activity of South Korea abroad, which was aimed above all at obtaining guarantees by the United States for immediate support of the South in case of a conflict with the DPRK, and which accelerated the importation of modern armaments and the arming of the territorial defense forces in the South, would result in the DPRK, as well, in an escalation of military preparations for the unification of the country, which remains the main goal of the leadership here. This would naturally lead to an overall deterioration of the situation in Korea.

Developments in the second half of April conformed to these expectations. From the 14th to the 28th of April several incidents took place in the area south of the demarcation line, which reportedly made the so-called United Nations forces suffer the casualties of 9 dead and 11 wounded. The North Korean side does not report its own casualties. Most incidents took place in the sector held by the 2nd US Infantry Division in the western part of the demilitarized zone. The most serious incident was an attack on a vehicle of the United Nations forces that was accompanying a patrol to Panmunjeom and the Swedish-Swiss camp, which took place in the immediate vicinity of the camp of the Western members of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, -at a spot that cannot be reached from the South.

In April, there was also a grenade explosion in the building of the International Telecommunications Exchange in Seoul [...] Soviet friends have been showing impatience in this question [the continued holding of the Pueblo]. All friends realize that the DPRK's handling of the Pueblo affair has been reverberating against the DPRK's own interest. Soviet representatives have reportedly expressed openly their position along these lines to the Koreans.

[...]

In the course of April and at the beginning of May all propaganda means of the DPRK continued to strive to generate the conviction that the Americans were going to provoke war at any time. As part of this propaganda, reports about incidents, even ones involving human casualties, were published that never occurred and the propaganda did not even try to prove them. During briefings about the April incidents, even the Minister of Foreign Affairs tried to convince the diplomatic corps of the acute danger of war. The country continues to be kept in a state of combat readiness and the people are being systematically persuaded of the necessity of liberating South Korea. [...]

In May, however, all those who have been following developments in the DPRK noticed an extraordinary calming of the situation, something without parallel in the last years. Although demobilization down to the level of January of this year was not carried out, according to friends, specialists are being released for civilian assignments. [...]

[...] We have been trying to find the causes that have led and particularly forced the DPRK leadership to adopt the new tactics. It is a difficult task in the conditions here, but after thorough discussions with friends and our own reflections, we are convinced that the changes have been prompted by a whole complex of the following causes:

□□□ important cause of the changes is an unfavorable economic situation [...]

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□□□□ a country of such a profound and developed cult of personality, differences of opinion are usually accompanied by sharp intra-party struggle and personnel changes. In connection with the problems mentioned above, rumors have been circulated within the diplomatic corps about the removal of the Politburo members of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party Kim Gwang-hyeop, who is at the same time Secretary of the Central Committee of the KWP and Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the DPRK, Li Ju-yeon (at the same time Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers), and Kim Chang-bong, who is also simultaneously Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of National Defense. It is a fact that these officials have recently not appeared in public. On the occasion of the visit by Deputy Chairman of the [Soviet] Council of Ministers Novikov, however, Li Ju-yeon was the partner of the Soviet guest; of course, it cannot be excluded that this was tactics. Kim Gwang-hyeop and Kim Chang-bong, reportedly blamed for the failure of the January attempt to liquidate the South Korean president Park Chung Hee, are still missing. In the first half of May, the Minister of Defense was to take a trip to [illegible, perhaps China] at the head of a military delegation. At the same time, an extensive reshuffling of intermediate cadres has been taking place in the areas of the economy, ideology and national unification. On the other hand, Minister of Foreign Affairs Pak Seong-cheol has been showing that he is on the rise and has become in effect the third highest-ranking person of the regime.

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□□□□ the course of the January events and immediately afterwards, during the mobilization and evacuation, serious deficiencies and difficulties became apparent. Lack of air defense weapons and limited railroad capacity connecting the DPRK with the USSR.

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□□□□ the developments in South Korea resulting from the attempted liquidation of Park Chung Hee and the Pueblo affair have been a serious warning for our Korean friends. The situation before January proved that the United States, as well as its South Korean partner, underestimated to some extent the development in the DPRK. The Americans considered the tenfold increase of incidents in the demilitarized zone in the last year in comparison with 1966 as a temporary phenomenon, which could be contained by the installation of electronic detection equipment along the whole demilitarized zone. [...]

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□□□□ some political events abroad have inevitably influenced the situation in this area. The DPRK is undoubtedly concerned about China's efforts to improve relations with Japan, but especially by the ongoing US/Vietnamese negotiations in Paris, which contradict the thesis according to which the forces of imperialism should be tied down anywhere in the world, as well as the thesis about the unification of the country by military force. Forcible unification can only be realized in conditions of international tension and escalation of war anywhere in the world.

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□□□□ finally, in view of the abovementioned factors, the influence of the USSR has been increasing, which has been made possible by, among others, the high level of economic and military assistance. The content of this assistance can be and in fact is manipulated (only defensive military technology is being supplied), quite apart from the fact that Soviet comrades have recently been looking more critically at the developments in the DPRK than was the case during the January events, which undoubtedly leads to direct, albeit extremely cautious, interventions.

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Among diplomats, there has also been the view that the present situation is the calm before the tempest, this being justified by the fact that the high military preparedness has been continuing as has the propaganda campaign aimed at the population and that the changes have concerned phenomena that have visually most impressed the observers here. The embassy is nevertheless convinced that the

"postponement" of the deadlines for the unification of the country has been imposed on the Korean leadership by the objective situation and that a removal of the objective causes of the tactical changes will require a longer period of time. The calming down is also confirmed by the fact that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here, which in March urgently demanded that foreign missions build air raid shelters, currently shows no initiative whatsoever on this issue. [...] It is also not to be neglected that the question of national unification or "liberation of the South" has been recently posed more conditionally, emphasizing the necessity of action by patriots in the South.

[...]

Ambassador Holub