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US National Security Council Memorandum, Talks with the ROK on Contacts with North Korea

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Summary:

Nick Platt reports on his efforts to coordinate tripartite talks with South Korea and North Korea.

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MEMORANDUM 6247

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

SECRET October 26, 1979

INFORMATION

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MEMORANDUM FOR: ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI

FROM: NICK PLATT NP

SUBJECT: Talks with the ROK on Contacts with North Korea (S)

After Harold Brown left Japan, I doubled back to Korea to participate in the first direct ROK-US talks on promoting dialogue with North Korea (October 22-23). The talks were organized at U.S. urging to follow up on the President's July 1 tripartite initiative. Ambassador Gleysteen chaired the U.S. delegation, which included Bob Rich of State, representatives of the UN Command in Korea, and myself. The Korean side was headed by the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs and included representatives from the Blue House, KCIA, Ministry of Defense, and the Unification Board. (C)

The talks were informal, exploratory, and not meant to be conclusive -- a cloud seeding exercise with no rain expected for months, or, more likely, years. The gathering was, however, the first of its kind, and set a significant precedent for advance consultation on the most sensitive issues facing the Korean Peninsula. (S)

The discussions covered long-term (unification), mid-term (trade, security, and political issues), and shorter-term (tension reducing measures in the DMZ) objectives. We agreed that unification was remote, but that our joint approach to the short- and mid-term goals should be shaped to avoid undercutting the prospects for ultimate unification. (S)

We exchanged a number of informal ideas on the economic military and political issues that would be the stuff of any real dialogue with North Korea. The ROK felt that the offers they had made since mid-1978 on trade and other contacts represented adequate inducements to the North, for the time being. They were more reluctant than we to consider

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any substantial proposals in advance of a conference. They agreed with us that the greatest benefit of a tripartite meeting would be the presentation of the south and north as equals representing responsible authorities, and wanted to avoid conceding in advance any inducement that might bring the north to the table with them. (S)

We all agreed that any real progress depended upon a shift in North Korean attitudes which had yet to occur. The ROK saw external pressures on Pyongyang as offering the best chance of changing the North Koreans, but acknowledged that it remained worthwhile to build positive incentives. (My own feeling is that changes inside North Korea will be more important than external pressures or ROK incentives.) We also agreed that now was time to actively consider together the possible substance, timing, and advantages of a follow-up joint private message to North Korea. (S)

The talks were cordial and relaxed, but nevertheless provided the ROK with an opportunity to catalogue their concerns. (C)

-- They are sensitive to North Korean charges that the ROK has compromised its sovereignty through acceptance of a U.S. military commander. As a result they feel it essential that they be the initiator of major proposals in the tripartite talks. (S)

-- They are concerned that moves to reduce tension with the North will undermine efforts to convince the Korean public that higher taxes are needed to pay for increased defense expenditures (as requested by the US). (S)

-- They worry that at a crucial moment US-ROK coordination will break down through preoccupation with broader global concerns or through simple negligence on our part. (S)

Concerns notwithstanding, the Koreans showed during the talks a serious if cautious interest in pursuing a relaxation of tensions with the North. They even admitted tacitly that more courteous and neutral public formulations were in order when referring to the other side. Though actual results of these consultations may be a long time in emerging, they represent an important beginning in the process of tying up the remaining great historical loose end in Asian policy, now that normalization with China is complete. (S)