

**October 28, 1979**

**Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to  
the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on  
Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'**

**Citation:**

"Telegram from the American Embassy in Seoul to the Secretary of State, 'Initial Reflections on Post-Park Chung Hee Situation in Korea'", October 28, 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, NLC-16-13-2-23-3, Remote Archives Capture (RAC), Jimmy Carter Library. Obtained by Charles Kraus. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/122099>

**Summary:**

Ambassador Gleysteen says he does "not know whether the stunning events of October 26/27 were a well planned military coup" or something else.

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**Original Language:**

English

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Original Scan

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SITUATION LISTING

DATE 02/23/80//054

SITUATION: NODIS OLD  
 SUBJECT CATEGORY: FE

MESSAGE / ANNOTATION:

MESSAGE:

HCE252

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DE RUEHUL #6370/01 3010926 CCY EO LINE AD065098

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1857

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SECRET SECTION 01 OF 03 SEOUL 16370

NODIS

CORRECTED COPY (EO LINE - 10/28/89 VICE 79)

E.O. 12065 IRDS-3 10/28/89 (GLEYSTEN, W.H.) GR-M

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PEPR, KS, US

SUBJECT: INITIAL REFLECTIONS ON POST-PARK CHUNG HEE

SITUATION IN KOREA

1. (S) ENTIRE TEXT.

2. BEGIN SUMMARY: WE STILL DO NOT KNOW WHETHER THE STUNNING EVENTS OF OCTOBER 26/27 WERE A WELL PLANNED MILITARY COUP, A MORE LIMITED "ELIMINATION" OF A LEADER FEARED BY SOME MEMBERS OF THE ESTABLISHMENT TO HAVE LOST HIS TOUCH, OR SIMPLY A BIZARRE INCIDENT. BUT THE RESULT IS TO CREATE A SITUATION OF UNCERTAINTY. THE KEY PLAYERS ARE STILL THE PREVIOUS ESTABLISHMENT FORCES PRONE TO AN AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL STRUCTURE. THE UNNATURAL QUIET PREVAILING IS ALMOST SURE TO GIVE WAY TO RISING TENSIONS AS VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF THE POLITICAL SCENE PROBE THE MEASURE OF THEIR POWER.

3. IT IS HAZARDOUS TO MAKE FAR-REACHING JUDGMENTS AT THIS POINT BUT I THINK THE ROK STRUCTURE WILL HOLD TOGETHER SHORT OF CHAOS, IN PART BECAUSE OF THE UNIFYING EFFECT OF THE NORTH KOREAN THREAT AND THE EXISTENCE OF BUREAUCRATIC STRUCTURES WHICH NOW PROVIDE CONSIDERABLE CONTINUITY. A MODESTLY LIBERALIZED YUSHIN STRUCTURE WOULD BE WELCOMED BY A MAJORITY OF KOREANS, BUT I AM NOT OPTIMISTIC THAT IT CAN BE REALIZED NOW. WE CAN IDENTIFY SOME POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS TO PARK, SUCH AS KIM CHONG PIL AND CHUNG IL KWAN, BUT WHO WILL SUCCEED PARK IS THE HARDEST GUESS OF ALL. A POPULAR CONTEST IN WHICH KIM TAE JUNG AND KIM YONG SAM COULD AT LEAST ENTER THE COMPETITION SEEMS UNLIKELY.

4. WE ARE OFF TO AN EXCELLENT START IN OUR OWN DEALINGS WITH THE NEW CIRCUMSTANCES HERE -- THANKS TO WASHINGTON'S SWIFT REACTION. IN THE FUTURE WE WILL BE FACED WITH

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MESSAGE / ANNOTATION:

MORE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS THAN THOSE OF THE PAST FEW DAYS. WE CAN EXPECT MANY ELEMENTS IN KOREA TO ASK OUR HELP IN PURSUING THEIR OWN ENDS. I URGE THAT WE RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO SUGGEST ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNS TO THE KOREANS IN FAVOR OF: (A) PROVIDING REASSURANCE AGAINST THE THREAT FROM THE NORTH, (B) URGING THE OBSERVANCE OF "CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESSES" AND (C) GENTLY WORKING THROUGH ALL CHANNELS TOWARD POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION. WE SHOULD AVOID CRITICAL PUBLIC COMMENT OR PUNISHING ACTIONS UNLESS AND UNTIL THE NEW REGIME HAS BLOTTED ITS COPYBOOK, AND WE SHOULD KEEP IN MIND THAT THE NEW AUTHORITIES OF KOREA DO NOT ENJOY THE SAME ECONOMIC CUSHION THAT HELPED PRESIDENT PARK SO DECISIVELY DURING RECENT YEARS. FINALLY, WE SHOULD REMEMBER THAT WE COULD EASILY PROVOKE A VERY UNHEALTHY ANTI-AMERICAN REACTION IF WE PRESS TOO HARD, TOO CRASSLY, AND TOO SOON FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN THE ROK. END SUMMARY.

5. THE STUNNING EVENTS OF OCTOBER 26/27 WERE NOT REVOLUTIONARY BUT THEY HAVE CREATED CIRCUMSTANCES WHERE WE CANNOT COMFORTABLY GO ON MAKING SOME OF THE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF THE PAST. WE ARE FACED WITH NEW UNCERTAINTY AND THE NEED FOR CARE IN THE WAY WE COMPORT OURSELVES.

6. IN THE FEW DAYS BETWEEN MY RETURN FROM WASHINGTON AND PARK'S DEATH, I WAS STRUCK BY THE PERVASIVENESS WITHIN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF WORRY ABOUT WHERE THE GOVERNMENT'S HARDLINE POLICIES WERE LEADING KOREA. PEOPLE IN ALMOST ALL SECTORS AND ALL LEVELS TOLD US OF THEIR ANXIETY AND WERE BECOMING INCREASINGLY BOLD IN IDENTIFYING PRESIDENT PARK AS THE MAN MAKING THE WRONG DECISIONS, LISTENING TO ADVISORS WHO WERE TELLING HIM WHAT THEY THOUGHT HE WANTED TO HEAR. IN OUR LAST CONVERSATION WITH HIM (OCTOBER 18), EVEN PARK HIMSELF SEEMED TO QUESTION THE WISDOM OF HIS HARDLINE DECISIONS.

7. COMBINED WITH THE MYSTERY IN MOST ACCOUNTS OF PARK'S DEATH, THIS SENSE OF MALAISE IN THE BLUE HOUSE PROMPTED MANY PEOPLE TO ASSUME PARK WAS KILLED IN A MILITARY COUP. THIS WAS MY OWN INITIAL CONCLUSION WHICH I HAVE SINCE REVISED IN THE ABSENCE OF CORROBORATING SIGNS. A MORE PLAUSIBLE POSSIBILITY IS THAT SOME INDIVIDUALS AROUND THE PRESIDENT, PERHAPS LED BY KCIA DIRECTOR KIM CHAE KYU, MAY HAVE DECIDED TO ELIMINATE THE PRESIDENT WHILE LEAVING THE GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE INTACT ON THE ASSUMPTION THEY COULD ARRANGE AN ACCEPTABLE SUCCESSOR. SOME ACCOUNTS OF THE KILLING DO SUGGEST CONSPIRACY, AND KIM CHAE KYU MAY HAVE BEEN ONE OF THOSE WHO FELT PARK'S HARDLINE ACTIONS WERE ENDANGERING THE REPUBLIC. EVEN THIS

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SUBJECT CATEGORY: FE

MESSAGE / ANNOTATION:

MORE LIMITED EXPLANATION IS NOT VERY CONVINCING BECAUSE OF  
THE RISKS INVOLVED.  
B. WHETHER THE KILLING WAS A WELL PLANNED MILITARY COUP,  
A MORE LIMITED "ELIMINATION", OR SIMPLY A BIZARRE INCIDENT,  
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SUBJECT CATEGORY: FE

MESSAGE / ANNOTATION:

MESSAGE:

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1858

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SECRET SECTION 02 OF 03 SEOUL 16370

NODIS

E.O. 12065 IRDS-3 10/28/79 (GLEYSTEN, W.H.) DR-M

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PEPR, KS, US

SUBJECT: INITIAL REFLECTIONS ON POST-PARK CHUNG HEE  
- SITUATION IN KOREA

WE ARE FACED WITH A NEW SITUATION IN KOREA WHOSE HALLMARK WILL BE UNCERTAINTY. THE KEY PLAYERS ARE STILL THE PREVIOUS ESTABLISHMENT FORCES -- ABOVE ALL THE MILITARY WHO, EVEN IF WE CAN ENCOURAGE THEM TOWARD MORE LIBERAL DIRECTIONS, HAVE NOT CHANGED THEIR SPOTS AND COMFORT IN WORKING WITHIN AN AUTHORITARIAN POLITICAL STRUCTURE. BEFORE LONG THE UNNATURAL QUIET WHICH PREVAILS WILL GIVE WAY TO RISING TENSION AS THE VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF THE POLITICAL SCENE SORT OUT THEIR POSITIONS AND PROBE THE MEASURE OF THEIR POWER. WOULD-BE SUCCESSORS TO THE PRESIDENT MUST ALREADY BE HARD AT WORK ON THEIR PLANS OF CAMPAIGN. THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION WILL ALMOST SURELY SEEK MORE REFORM THAN THEY ARE LIKELY TO ACHIEVE, AND IF THEY PUSH TOO HARD TOO SOON WE MAY SEE A RAPID RETURN TO POLITICAL POLARIZATION, CONFUSION AND UNCERTAINTY ARE QUITE POSSIBLE. IT IS UNLIKELY THAT SOME LEADER WITH THE RIGHT COMBINATION OF FIRMNESS AND SUBTLETY WILL MOVE IN SMOOTHLY TO TAKE OVER. WHILE THE JOCKEYING OF LESS SUITABLE LEADERS IS GOING ON, WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ASSUME, AS WE HAVE DURING THE PAST MANY YEARS, THAT THERE IS A TOUGH, CAPABLE, COMMONSENSICAL -- IF AUTHORITARIAN -- LEADER WHO IS THOROUGHLY IN CHARGE.

9. AT THIS POINT, I THINK IT HAZARDOUS TO MAKE FAR-REACHING JUDGMENTS. I AM REASONABLY COMFORTABLE IN STATING THAT I EXPECT THE SITUATION TO HOLD TOGETHER SHORT OF CHAOS, FEAR OF WEAKENING THEMSELVES IN THE FACE OF A NORTH KOREAN THREAT AND WORRIES ABOUT ALIENATING OTHER ELEMENTS OF KOREAN SOCIETY MAY HELP KEEP THE MILITARY RELATIVELY UNIFIED. CERTAINLY SO FAR THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS HAS WORKED SMOOTHLY. THE CABINET HAS PERFORMED AS IT SHOULD

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MESSAGE / ANNOTATION:

AND THE MILITARY HAVE GONE OUT OF THEIR WAY TO DO THE RIGHT THING. BUT COMPETITION AND CONFUSION MAY DEVELOP TO THE POINT OF TRIGGERING A MORE CLASSIC FORM OF COUP. IN ANY EVENT, I CANNOT PREDICT HOW LONG IT WILL TAKE FOR A NEW EQUILIBRIUM TO DEVELOP. ALTHOUGH A MODESTLY LIBERALIZED YUSHIN STRUCTURE WOULD BE WELCOMED BY A MAJORITY OF KOREANS, IT IS HARD TO SEE HOW IT WOULD BE REALIZED AMONG A PEOPLE WHO ARE SO FRACTIOUS, BLUNT AND AGGRESSIVE WITH THE RESULT THAT HARDLINERS TEND TO RISE TO THE TOP. WE MAY BE FACED WITH AN ATTEMPT TO PRESERVE THE STATUS QUO WITH A LESS EFFECTIVE LEADER.

10. ABOVE ALL, IT IS HARD TO PREDICT WHO WILL COME OUT ON TOP. THE CONSTITUTION CALLS FOR AN INDIRECT ELECTION OF A NEW PRESIDENT WITHIN 90 DAYS. IF ONE OCCURS, THE PERSON SELECTED MAY NOT BE THE PERMANENT LEADER. KIM CHONG PIL IS ONE OBVIOUS CONTENDER AS IS CHUNG IL KWAN. THE FORMER WOULD BE LIKELY TO TAKE CHARGE; THE LATTER WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO PRESIDE OVER A MORE DIVERSE POWER STRUCTURE. YI HU RAK WILL BE HARD AT WORK TRYING TO PULL STRINGS EVEN THOUGH HE IS PROBABLY TOO HATED TO BE CHOSEN AS THE LEADER. THE MILITARY MAY PREFER TEMPORARILY TO ALLOW THE ACTING PRESIDENT TO PRESIDE BEYOND THE 90 DAY LIMIT AND RETAIN POWER IN A MILITARY COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP. A POPULAR CONTEST WHERE PEOPLE SUCH AS KIM TAE JUNG AND KIM YONG SAM COULD AT LEAST ENTER THE COMPETITION SEEMS HIGHLY UNLIKELY AT THIS TIME.

11. GIVEN THIS LARGE DEGREE OF UNPREDICTABILITY, WE WILL HAVE TO EXERCISE EXTRA CARE IN OUR OWN APPROACH TO THE ROK. WE ARE OFF TO AN EXCELLENT START, HAVING SWIFTLY MADE STATEMENTS AND TAKEN ACTIONS TO EMPHASIZE THE CONTINUITY OF OUR PROTECTOR ROLE. AS WE MOVE ON, HOWEVER, WE MAY BE FACED WITH FAR MORE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS. FIRST, THERE WILL BE ELEMENTS IN KOREA WHO WISH TO BORROW OUR INFLUENCE. I HAVE ALREADY BEEN APPROACHED BY SOME AND I EXPECT TO BE APPROACHED BY MANY MORE GENERALS, DISSIDENTS, POLITICAL OPPOSITIONISTS WHO WANT OUR HELP TO PURSUE THEIR OWN ENDS. EVEN WITHOUT THESE SUPPLICANTS, I WOULD URGE MOST STRONGLY THAT WE DE-EMPHASIZE OUR PROCLIVITY TO SUGGEST ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNS IN FAVOR OF A QUIETER ROLE OF PROVIDING REASSURANCE AGAINST THE THREAT FROM NORTH KOREA, URGING OBSERVANCE OF THE "CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS" (WE SHOULD AVOID EMBRACING THE YUSHIN CONSTITUTION), AND GENTLY WORKING THROUGH ALL CHANNELS TOWARD POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION. WE WILL HAVE TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT THE CHANNELS WE USE. WE MUST AVOID CONVEYING THE IMPRESSION THAT WE WOULD BE HAPPY WITH A MILITARY TAKEOVER, BUT WE MUST ALSO WORK WITH

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SUBJECT CATEGORY: FE

MESSAGE / ANNOTATION:

THE MILITARY WHO WILL BE A VERY INFLUENTIAL FACTOR -- EVEN TOWARD LIBERALIZATION. STRONG STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT SUCH AS WE MADE YESTERDAY PROVIDE AN EXCELLENT BASIS FOR THIS RELATIONSHIP.

12. WE SHOULD ALSO NOT TREAT THE NEW REGIME AS AN INHERITOR OF THE SINS OF THE PARK REGIME. UNTIL THE NEW CROWD HAVE BLOTTEED THEIR COPYBOOK, WE SHOULD GO OUT OF OUR WAY

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MESSAGE / ANNOTATION:

MESSAGE:

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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1859  
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SECRET SECTION 03 OF 03 SEOUL 16370

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TAGS: PGDV, PINT, PEPR, KS, US

SUBJECT: INITIAL REFLECTIONS ON POST-PARK CHUNG HEE  
\* SITUATION IN KOREA

TO AVOID CRITICAL PUBLIC COMMENT OR TO TAKE SYMBOLIC  
PUNISHING ACTION, SUCH AS ABSTENTIONS IN THE IFIS, WHILE  
WE INTEND TO CONTINUE TO PRESS FOR LIBERAL TREATMENT FOR  
POLITICAL ACTIVISTS, WE MUST AVOID EARLY PRESSURES FOR ANY  
DRAMATIC STEPS OF LIBERALIZATION. WE SHOULD BE AS GENEROUS  
AS POSSIBLE IN DEALING WITH ECONOMIC ISSUES SINCE THE  
CURRENT ROKC DOES NOT ENJOY THE SAME ECONOMIC CUSHION THAT  
HELPED PARK CHUNG HEE SO DECISIVELY DURING RECENT YEARS.  
FINALLY, WE SHOULD KEEP IN MIND THAT THE KOREA OF 1979 IS  
NOT THE KOREA OF THE EARLY 1960S WHEN WE WERE ABLE TO BULLY  
THE EARLY PARK REGIME INTO CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS. I DON'T  
THINK THERE IS ANY CHANGE IN THE POPULAR DESIRE FOR A MORE  
LIBERAL GOVERNMENT, BUT SINCE THE 1960S, U.S. PRESSURES  
ON KOREA HAVE ACCUMULATED TO THE POINT WHERE WE COULD FACE  
AN EXTREMELY UNHEALTHY ANTI-AMERICAN REACTION SHOULD WE  
PRESS TOO HARD AND TOO CRASSLY TO BRING ABOUT STRUCTURAL  
CHANGE.

13. DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS AMEMBASSIES TOKYO AND KUALA  
LUMPUR, KUALA LUMPUR FOR EA ASSISTANT SECRETARY HOLBROOKE,  
GLEYSTEN

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