

~~SECRET~~

RECOMMEND FULL  
RELEASE

DOC #201

DOS

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT  
From: Cyrus Vance  
Harold Brown *Harold Brown* 20 DEC 1979  
Subject: The Situation in the Republic of Korea

You have asked that we weigh in strongly and without delay to ensure continuation of civilian rule and preserve command relationships in Korea.

We believe our central objectives at this stage are threefold: to prevent a dangerous disintegration of army unity, to preserve the momentum toward broadly-based democratic government under orderly civilian leadership, and to deter North Korea from adventurism through keeping the ROK military strong and focused on preserving ROK independence. The latter will require buttressing the image of President Choi and the cabinet as much as possible.

Ambassador Gleysteen and General Wickham have, under instruction, moved without delay to pursue these objectives in a forceful manner. Gleysteen has seen the President, the new Prime Minister (the most powerful civilian figure in the new government), and General Chun Tu-hwan, the leading figure among the insurgent generals group. General Wickham has seen almost all of the other key senior military players. The message has been a stiff one, stressing the importance of moving ahead with orderly civilian political processes and avoiding any further action which might jeopardize unity within the military. To the generals we have let it be known that a military-led reversal of political progress or military takeover of the government would have grave consequences for future cooperation between our governments and military establishments. To the civilian cabinet we have also stressed the importance of establishing a clear public timetable for constitutional change and national elections and have now been assured that President Choi will announce such a timetable on Friday.

At present, the situation has stabilized at least temporarily. The greatest danger probably lies in the possibility for further unraveling of the military chain of command and additional direct moves or countermoves by segments of the military after the bottle was uncorked by the actions of one group on the night of December 12. If this can be prevented, military affairs may return gradually to normal, although with new leadership. Those now calling the tune in the military are competent and well-trained. The major uncertainties concern their political views and ambitions.

R-1

14-M-0708

05631

~~SECRET~~

Sec Def Cont Nr. X-

~~50~~  
~~3 DEC 84~~

~~SECRET~~

At the moment, they are defensive about their aims. General Chun Tu-hwa has pledged to Ambassador Gleysteen that the military will stay out of politics, and the new Army Chief of Staff has publicly repeated that pledge on December 18. Since little purpose is served by challenging their sincerity, we are making it clear that we will judge them by their deeds. It remains to be seen whether their involvement can be as limited as they now claim.

Meanwhile, the civil government has regained some of its momentum and Ambassador Gleysteen has pressed President Choi to announce on Friday in his inaugural speech a definite timetable for constitutional reform and new elections, thus providing a framework which will be greatly reassuring to the Korean people. Most political discussion of this topic in Korea has assumed that about one year would be appropriate to carry out these transitional tasks in an orderly manner.

Since the events of December 12, President Choi has proceeded to announce his new cabinet, largely composed of neutral figures and including several persons who are very reassuring to dissident and opposition groups. Three places were determined by the younger generals, though only three and those not clearly filled with their own group. Also in the past few days there has been further dismantling of the indictments and prosecutions against opposition figures and an announcement that the remaining amnesties under the now-abolished Emergency Measure No. 9 will be granted at the time of the inaugural. Thus, we do not see any immediate evidence of a move to stop the political process to turn the clock back. Your message of congratulation to President Choi will be helpful in buttressing his position and the commitment to political evolution.

#### The Violation of Command Relationships

After Army Chief of Staff Chung's guards resisted his arrest on the evening of December 12, and some Capital Security Command forces tried to stop the forceful action launched by the younger generals, one of the generals involved in the insurgent planning brought a regiment of the Ninth Division--normally deployed in a reserve role north of the capital--into Seoul to help secure the situation in the early hours of December 13. The Ninth Division is part of the Third ROK Army which is operationally under the ROK-US Combined Forces Command. Although the movement of this small force did not in itself jeopardize Korean defenses, John Wickham impressed on senior ROK military officers in the most forceful way the grave danger of actions which break the chain of command and invite schisms which could seriously erode the command and control within the military. General Wickham has requested an official explanation of this apparent violation of the spirit and legal intent of the Combined Forces Command arrangements.

~~SECRET~~

~~SECRET~~

In this instance, of course, the Korean chain of command itself was badly breached. It was that serious breach which by extension in the case of the unit of the Ninth Division meant that the CFC chain was also violated. We find both aspects equally serious and have made these points strongly.

While we believe that key themes of our policy concerns have now been fully conveyed to all relevant actors in Korea, we will look carefully at discretionary areas of cooperation with the ROK military in coming weeks until we are fully reassured that military unity and cooperation are being maintained and that the government is being allowed to pursue constructive policies of democratic development. After President Choi's announcement on December 21 of a timetable for constitutional revision and elections, General Wickham will convey to the new military group that their support for this process will be the first significant test by which we will determine our cooperation in these matters.

~~SECRET~~



National Security Archive,  
Suite 701, Gelman Library, The George Washington University,  
2130 H Street, NW, Washington, D.C., 20037,  
Phone: 202/994-7000, Fax: 202/994-7005, [nsarchiv@gwu.edu](mailto:nsarchiv@gwu.edu)