

Moscow is raising the security stakes in East Asia

by Richard Cohen

Sources close to the White House emphasize that President Ronald Reagan's six-day trip to Northeast Asia, where he will spend four days in Japan and two days in Korea, will focus, due to a rapidly escalating series of events, on the Soviet security threat to the region.

These disclosures are particularly notable when compared with reports given to this correspondent only two months ago by sources intimately involved in the planning of the President's itinerary, which at that time included a Southeast Asia leg of the trip—to the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand—as well as the northeast leg. At that time it was stressed that the trip would seek to downplay "security issues" and instead quietly lay the foundation in "the economic and technical areas" for the President's long-term Asia policy based on a then-undefined idea of a "Pacific Community."

The radical revision of the purpose of the trip, which will end on Nov. 13, is a clear response to what amounts to the most acute and deliberate Soviet-sponsored security provocations in the Far East in over two decades.

The Soviet battle plan began in mid-summer, and escalated into the Sept. 1 shootdown of the Korean Airlines Flight 007. Then, on Oct. 9, the Soviets unleashed North Korean President Kim Il Sung, an action which neither Moscow nor Peking had dared consider for over two decades. A terror bombing engineered by North Korean military agents in Rangoon, Burma, aimed at assassinating South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan, killed 21 persons including four South Korean cabinet members and other high-ranking government figures. Tensions between North and South Korea are now on a globally explosive hair trigger.

Soviet provocations during this period have extended far beyond Korea to other areas considered important and in some cases vital to Washington. The moves against South Korea on Sept. 1 and Oct. 9 have been parlayed—in conjunction with direct military actions—to exert unprecedented pressure on the government of Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone, and weaken Japan's special relationship with Washington. The Soviet Union has exerted parallel pressure on West Germany in the period leading up to U.S. deployment in Europe of intermediate-range nuclear missiles. The Sovi-

et-instigated North Korean actions have a secondary target of severely straining Washington-Peking relations on the eve of Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Zhan's visit to the United States in December and President Reagan's return visit to Peking in May 1984. Finally, the Soviet attempt to eliminate President Chun is aimed as well at Reagan's long-term "Pacific Community" policy.

Moscow's number-one target: Japan

The Soviet offensive began—as it usually does—with a peace offer.

On Aug. 27, *Pravda* issued an appeal to the Japanese government from Soviet President Yuri Andropov. "The Soviet Union, in reducing its medium-range missiles in the European part of the country to a level equal to the number of British and French missiles, would liquidate all the missiles so reduced. . . . The concerns currently voiced by China and Japan that the Soviet Union simply intends to redeploy SS-20s from Europe to the east should be removed." Moscow has reversed its standing claim to have "reserved the right" to transfer SS-20s from west to east. The Soviet ploy was quickly addressed by Japanese Foreign Minister Shintaro Abe, who urged that the proposal "warranted no optimism." The Japanese defense ministry dismissed the Andropov proposal as a "surface concession" which refused to deal with the 108 Soviet SS-20s now stationed in Asia.

While the Soviets were making their peace offer just days prior to the KAL shootdown, they began construction, on the island of Suisho, only 4.5 miles off the coast of Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido, of what appears to be a permanent military base. In 1978, the Soviets had begun their buildup to division-level forces on the southernmost Kurile Islands, partially in response to the signing of the Sino-Japanese Friendship Treaty. The buildup was considered a significant provocation in Tokyo at the time, since Japan has an outstanding claim to the southern Kuriles which the Soviets had privately agreed to honor prior to the sudden demise of Moscow-Tokyo peace negotiations in 1956. Since 1978, the militarization of the Kuriles has been pivotal to the Soviets' securing of the Sea of Okhotsk, where a major portion of

Soviet long-range submarine-based nuclear missiles are located. The late-August Suisho construction escalated the territorial provocation while re-emphasizing the high-security nature of the zone.

On Sept. 1, Moscow sent a brutal signal not only to Washington and Seoul but also to Tokyo. And in the days immediately following the KAL shootdown, Soviet military aircraft flew deep into Japanese airspace as if to re-emphasize Japan's vulnerability. On Sept. 12, Japanese fighters scrambled in response to the appearance of Soviet aircraft, including Backfire bombers, over the Sea of Japan. Then on Sept. 29, the Soviet Air Force reinforced its fighter-aircraft base in the Kuriles.

Nor could the threat of violent escalations on the Korean peninsula after the North Korean-engineered attempt on Chun's life be missed by those concerned with Japan's security. On the ground in Northeast Asia, the over 600,000 South Korean military and the token 40,000 U.S. forces stationed in Korea represent Japan's front line.

On Oct. 26, senior Reagan administration officials acknowledged what White House sources had leaked to this reporter a week before: The Soviet Union has noticeably increased the number of new construction sites for additional Asia-based SS-20s. The senior official admitted, "We know of three additional sites, with at least 27 more missiles and 81 additional warheads, that are under construction."

Why Kim was turned loose

The sudden pressure directed at Tokyo aimed at facilitating Moscow's principal strategic goal in the East Asia arena, the severing of the U.S.-Japanese special relationship through a growing show of force, first initiated with the notorious Soviet naval buildup in the Pacific a decade and a half ago, paled in comparison with Moscow's targeting of Seoul via Pyongyang beginning Sept. 1.

Immediately following the KAL shootdown, South Korean intelligence as well as other friendly intelligence agencies were reported to have received hard intelligence that some form of North Korean terrorist action could be expected before the prestigious initiation of the world Inter-Parliamentary meeting scheduled for early October in Seoul. Then, on Oct. 9, on the first stop of a six-nation Asian trip in Rangoon, Burma, President Chun and the top echelon of his government saw terror strike. With a large section of the Korean leadership standing in the Aung San Mausoleum, an explosion blew the roof off the building. Twenty-one were dead, including Deputy Premier and Economic Planning Minister Suh Suk Joon, Foreign Minister Lee Bum Suk, Minister of Commerce and Industry Kim Dong Whie, and Minister of Energy and Resources Suh Sang Chul, as well as Hahn Pyong Choon, the general secretary of the office of the president, and Kim Jae Ik, senior economic adviser to Chun.

On Nov. 4, the Burmese government announced it had "firmly established" that North Korean commandos were responsible for the mass assassination. "The statements of

the two captured Koreans, the articles seized, and facts obtained from investigations have firmly established that the explosion was the work of saboteurs sent by North Korea." That same day, the U.S. State Department under White House direction cheered the Burmese finding and announced that the United States would be consulting with its allies in the region to develop a response. Indeed, in a White House briefing given by a senior State Department official on Oct. 26—just after the U.S. military action in Grenada—it was

North Korean President Kim Il Sung had been restrained before by both Moscow and Peking refusing him protection and backing. This time, one of the two gave Pyongyang the "green light"—and it was not Peking. Moscow clearly calculated the result of the action: a drastic escalation of Korean tensions and, had the assassination attempt against South Korea's Chun Doo Hwan succeeded, the elimination of the Asian leader closest to Reagan's long-term regional goals.

clarified that the United States now had convincing circumstantial evidence to prove the North Korean role in the massacre.

Both White House and intelligence community sources have reported that the Sept. 1 KAL shootdown and the Oct. 9 Rangoon terror bombing, in conjunction with other Soviet military moves including those in Northeast Asia, counted heavily in conclusions drawn by Reagan and senior national security advisers that the Soviet Union had embarked, starting Sept. 1, on a global pattern of "serious security probes." It was this assessment, according to senior White House officials, which primed the atmosphere for Reagan's Grenada decision.

The North Korean intention to cripple the South Korean government and, if necessary, engage directly in military action against the South has been manifest for decades. In 1982, these "natural" North Korean goals were reinvigorated by South Korean efforts to challenge North Korea globally.

In August 1982, President Chun journeyed to Africa for the first time, visiting Gabon, Kenya, Nigeria, and Senegal. Up to that point North Korea had spent years building relations through military arms sales and training to several African nations. In addition, in September 1983, King Hussein of Jordan arrived in Seoul to inspect South Korean military facilities and conclude close economic ties. In addition to Jordan, South Korea maintains close economic ties to Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states.

In direct opposition to the South Korean-Saudi-Jordan nexus, North Korea has over the past three years entered into a special relationship with Khomeini's Iran, supplying it with light and heavy arms.

The architect of South Korea's global challenge to the North was the late Foreign Minister Lee. With a number of successful challenges plus the 1988 Olympics scheduled to be held in Seoul and Chun seeking closer ties with six Asian nations, most notably India, where a North Korean diplomat was recently arrested for trying to smuggle diamonds into the country and others have been implicated in a drug-smuggling ring, it was clear that Seoul had gone well beyond Kim's boiling point. But Kim has been restrained before by both Moscow and Peking refusing him protection and backing.

This time, one of the two gave Pyongyang the "green light"—and it wasn't Peking. Moscow clearly calculated the result of the action: a drastic escalation of Korean tensions and, had the assassination attempt against Chun succeeded, the elimination of the Asian leader closest to Reagan's long-term regional goals.

Indeed, Thai sources have reported that Thai security forces were forced to ground several South Korean commercial jets in Bangkok following Oct. 9. They report that special South Korean commandoes were found on board bound for Rangoon, on a mission to blow up the North Korean Embassy. Immediately following the Oct. 9 incident, White House sources confided that the greatest concern was a violent South Korean reaction to the provocation. While the immediate threat of South Korean retaliation has calmed, the temperature is still high on the Korean DMZ.

On July 31, 1982, Chun, operating in close consultation with Lee, had proposed a summit to discuss matters of mutual concern for those nations of the region which was to include a survey of means for mutual cooperation among Pacific Basin countries. According to Korean sources, Chun first brought up the idea when he paid a visit to President-elect Reagan during the transition period. Chun, while later promoting the plan in 1981 within the ASEAN organization, was to actively promote it on his latest trip to the Southeast Asian region prior to Reagan's arrival in Seoul. His scheduled trip to India was considered important. Lee had been ambassador to New Delhi and had established a close relationship to Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In addition, the Chun proposal would keep the door open to the PRC's joining the "Community," again an element of Lee's so-called "Northern Policy" which proposed South Korean rap-

prochement with major socialist bloc countries including China and the U.S.S.R. According to informed White House sources, Chun's "Pacific Community" efforts were considered essential by the White House, while White House sources acknowledged that the Soviets were likely to react sharply against it. The assassination attack on Chun and Lee was therefore to be read in Washington as a violent attack on Reagan's long-term Asia policy.

Why Peking is nervous

The Soviet-sponsored Pyongyang action also targeted Washington-Peking relations. Burmese sources have reported that Chinese Foreign Minister Wu, who arrived in Washington one day after the Rangoon bombing, saw his meeting with Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz dominated by the North Korean attack. Bangkok sources went further, reporting that the Chinese were terrified over the implications of the Rangoon bombing. White House sources explained that they believed that a central target of Soviet sponsorship of the bombing was to strain Washington-Peking relations. They reasoned that expected South Korean retaliation would generate polarization on the Korean Peninsula and force Peking to back North Korea in order to soften any Pyongyang tilt toward Moscow. The United States would have to support South Korea, thereby creating serious stress in the wake of Zhao's visit to Washington. Indeed, close observers of Asia had doubted that Rangoon would directly identify the North Korean role in the bombing, let alone break relations with North Korea, as they did.

Burmese sources who confided that Ne Win's Burma must always consider Peking's attitude before acting had predicted that Rangoon would attempt to blunt full responsibility for Pyongyang. The final Burmese finding only suggests that Peking did not object to Rangoon's final assessment.

Further, in the midst of North Korea's ouster from Rangoon, Kim has urgently sought clarification from Peking with respect to Peking's policy toward South Korea in the wake of the Chinese decision to issue visas to South Korean officials for the first time. China, in a direct slap at Pyongyang, has justified its action by stating it wants to take steps toward creating a climate of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

The Nov. 4 release of documents obtained by U.S. intelligence on Grenada showed a treaty linking North Korea to military and training aid for that country. This, along with reports that North Korea is heavily involved in Nicaragua, shows unusual collaboration with the Soviet Union and Cuba, particularly when most watchers of North Korea had concluded that Kim had strongly inclined toward Peking in recent years. Indeed, the infamous runway in Grenada was believed by many to be used to facilitate Cuban troop and equipment support for Angola. One of Angola's principal adversaries, Zaire, had until recently been supported by North Korea. White House and intelligence sources are convinced that Kim's pendulum has swung back to Moscow.