

Has Korea become the strategic flashpoint of Asia once again?

by Richard Cohen

The Korean peninsula has, over the course of the past several months, emerged as a dangerous strategic flashpoint. Several well-informed Asian diplomatic sources say that their governments, which have recently been involved in secret negotiations and discussion aimed at reducing Korean tensions, believe that a virtual alert exists for the next two years around the prospect of Soviet-fostered instability in Korea.

The intense focus on Korea apparent in Washington, Tokyo, and Peking, as the new front line of Moscow's expansionist Asia policy, was highlighted when North Korean lifetime head of state Kim Il Sung visited the Soviet Union on May 23-26. Kim reportedly had two audiences with Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko and met with the full range of the Soviet Union's top leadership. Kim followed his Moscow visit—the first since he met with party secretary Nikita Khrushchev 17 years ago—with a stay in the German Democratic Republic, where he had lengthy sessions with party chief Erich Honecker. Kim followed his Berlin trip with visits to other key Eastern European capitals.

The dramatic Kim move toward Moscow and its satellites had, according to informed sources, three immediate objectives. First, Kim was sure to bring with him on his European trip his son, Kim Jong Il, the 41-year-old head of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) and since 1982 the publicly proclaimed heir to his father's dictatorship. Even up through early 1984, Moscow and its satellites had strongly reacted against Kim's plan for hereditary succession, but the successful trip and subsequent signals from Moscow and Eastern European capitals suggest a Soviet reversal.

Second, Kim reportedly sought commitments from the Soviet government of renewed support for the sagging North Korean economy. Informed sources report the Soviets agreed to new barter deals that partly satisfy North Korean needs.

The most crucial aspect of Kim's visit was aimed at securing a new Soviet commitment for a drastic upgrading of arms supplies to Pyongyang. Intelligence sources report that Kim's shopping list focused on the needs of still-inferior North Korean air power. Pyongyang was keen to obtain a match for the South Korean U.S.-supplied F-16 fighter aircraft. Although apparently willing overall to upgrade arms supplies, the Soviets have hedged on the critical question of

Kim's air power requests. According to Paris-based intelligence sources, Moscow is even demonstrating caution on the sale of MiG-23s to North Korea—an aircraft a step below F-16 capabilities.

Kim's 'military option'

However, what is terrifying Asian diplomats about Kim's visit and his desperate need to maintain a credible "military option" against the South is that Moscow has secured a powerful strategic ace. These diplomats fear that the Soviet leadership now holds in its hands real power in determining the future of the Korean peninsula. Moscow, by getting decisive control over Kim's military option, has won important leverage in areas of vital national security interest for Japan, the United States, the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.), and the Republic of Korea.

The Soviets do not necessarily intend a full-scale war to emerge on the Korean peninsula, but may simply seek to escalate tensions so as to threaten three key strategic points. Moscow has obtained the ability to directly attack the critical relationship between the P.R.C. on the one hand and the United States and Japan on the other. A break in that relationship would virtually ensure the collapse of China's long-term modernization program and create a new epicenter of instability in Asia, favoring Soviet schemes.

Second, Soviet-managed tension in Korea represents a drastic increase of pressure on Tokyo—pressure that has been increasing weekly since mid-1983. Both weakened resistance to Soviet challenges in Tokyo and a break in China's opening to the West would provide the greatest opportunity for the Soviets to "Finlandize" both the P.R.C. and Japan—the central objectives of long-term Soviet Asia strategy.

Finally, since the fall of 1983, the United States, Japan, and the P.R.C. have been secretly involved in an effort to lay the groundwork for the long-term pacification of Korea. Besides Korean pacification, short-term U.S. efforts to increase U.S.-Japanese military cooperation, particularly in areas of advanced technology, and second, U.S.-led cooperation in guaranteeing Peking access to Western military-related technology, have blunted immediate Soviet efforts to neutralize those two countries.

Soviet seizure of the "North Korea card" could threaten to break those delicate negotiations. In short: Moscow's new Korean capability represents the key to its Asian policy.

Clearly, Kim has no interest in becoming a long-term toady of Moscow; but it is also obvious that he now must heed their pressure. Kim and his lineage—in order to survive—must at all costs maintain a valid "military option" to threaten the forced reunification of Korea.

It is exactly this military option which the secret negotiations between Peking, Tokyo, and Washington have sought to close down.

Since the late 1940s, Kim and his associates who now dominate the senior levels of the North Korean military have built a massive military machine for one purpose—to threaten the South. Furthermore, his son, Kim Jon Il, heads the notorious 100,000-man strong North Korean special forces, probably the largest terrorist organization in the world with deep connections into international drug trafficking.

The central feature of Kim's willingness in the 1970s to partially follow Peking's lead in seeking rapprochement with Washington was to secure a U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea—an objective nearly obtained during the first half of the Carter administration. However, with North Korean leadership reportedly sure that President Ronald Reagan will win four more years in office, the negotiated path toward weakening the South has no credibility in Pyongyang.

How diplomacy was sabotaged

The dramatic events leading to the revival of Korea as the most volatile Asian flashpoint include: 1) breakthrough secret negotiations between the P.R.C. and South Korea over an early 1983 hijacking incident, 2) the incredible Soviet shoot-down of KAL flight 007, 3) the trip of Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to the P.R.C. in late 1983, and 4) the North Korean-directed Rangoon massacre of the South Korean cabinet.

In early 1983, the late South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Bum Suk unveiled his so-called "go north" foreign policy—a policy secretly supported by the Reagan administration and one aimed at isolating North Korea from its long-term bastions of support in Moscow and Peking. Lee's overall objective was to eliminate the North's long-established military option against Seoul.

Lee's "go north" tactic sought at first to establish dialogue between South Korea and the P.R.C. and then between South Korea and the Soviet Union. Once such a dialogue was firmly established, pressure could be applied on North Korea through all interested capitals to enter serious talks to ease tensions on the peninsula.

In May 1983, the crew of a Chinese civilian airliner defected to Seoul. The incident provided the first opportunity for unprecedented P.R.C.-South Korean contacts. Upon learning of these negotiations, Kim and his coterie were

shocked at the implications.

Reportedly to calm Pyongyang, the P.R.C. offered Kim public acceptance of his succession plan. But in this episode, for the first time, tensions had visibly surfaced between Peking and Pyongyang—tensions that would quickly escalate and were inevitable once the Deng Chiao Ping group consolidated power in China in 1980. Key in Deng's high-priority modernization effort would be a foreign policy based on border pacification. If modernization were to succeed, China would have to avoid repeating the costly disaster of the 1979 Vietnam border war.

Of all the borders, the Korean is probably the most critical from the standpoint of Deng's new policy. If tensions rose between North and South, the P.R.C. would be forced to side with the North. There they would have to compete with Moscow, which remains in a far better material position to support Pyongyang. Such a competition would drain P.R.C. resources and put a serious crimp in modernization.

But even more important, such increased Korean tension could lead to conflict between the P.R.C. and its two principal future technological suppliers—Japan and the United States. This would mean strategic disaster. Therefore, it was inevitable that Dengist China would vigorously seek some form of Korean reconciliation that would remove the military option from Kim's hands.

While the initial P.R.C.-South Korea talks were getting under way, Lee apparently made successful contact with the Soviet leadership. In October 1983, a Soviet delegation was slated to visit Seoul for a meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. However, all contact between Moscow and Seoul was suddenly shut down on Sept. 1, 1983, when the Soviet Union shot down Korean airliner 007.

Shift in Soviet's Asia policy?

Strong speculation exists in Peking and Washington that the incident and the later reported Soviet and East German support for the North Korean terror bombing in Rangoon, Burma, killing four South Korean cabinet members, partly reflected the reassertion in Soviet Asia policy of the hardline anti-China heirs of the late Politburo ideologist Mikhail Suslov. These are forces embedded in the Communist Party apparatus and operating in league with Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and leading figures in the Red Army.

The early 1984 collapse of Sino-Soviet talks, in the wake of KAL and Rangoon, suggests that the more subtle Asian gambit of the late Soviet President Andropov's protégé, spy-master Geidar Aliyev, has been dropped. In addition, in the fall of 1983, Moscow began to drastically step up a menacing campaign of rhetoric against "Japanese remilitarization."

The new Soviet Asia policy-approach quickly evolved around Defense Secretary Weinberger's September 1983 ground-breaking trip to Peking. According to both Chinese and U.S. sources, the Weinberger trip was critical in setting

a new phase in Sino-U.S. relations. Stabilization of Korea was high on Weinberger's agenda. Acting on behalf of Reagan, the Defense Secretary reportedly made the first effort toward what has become a secret negotiation between Washington, Peking, and Tokyo to develop a workable formula for Korea talks.

Weinberger also set the stage for the first U.S.-China arms accords. These agreements, consolidated during a low-key June 1984 visit to the United States by P.R.C. Defense Minister Zhang Aiping, entailed relatively standard military technology transfer to the People's Republic (e.g., the TOW missile) and more important avionics technology. While such technology transfer represents no immediate threat to Moscow and its allies, it does suggest that Peking has developed a Western outlet for security modernization and thus will be far more resistant to Soviet efforts to "Finlandize" China.

The immediate response from Pyongyang and Moscow to the Weinberger breakthrough was the October 1983 massacre of four members of the South Korean cabinet, including Foreign Minister Lee.

The Rangoon attack was a turning point. It once again put veto power into Kim's hands on any Korean talks; and it made Seoul less likely to enter into such talks. Following the bombing, Seoul proclaimed that it would not meet with the North until the North "apologized" for the massacre. The North, which even in private still refuses to take responsibility for Rangoon, has stated that it will not enter any meeting in which Rangoon is brought up. Thus, any momentum toward talks was thoroughly sabotaged in the wake of the massacre.

Pyongyang-Peking tensions also surfaced after Rangoon. Chinese Communist Party Chairman Hu Yao Bang—during a November 1983 visit to Tokyo—reportedly told Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone that China and Japan must cooperate to prevent escalation of Korean tensions. Since Hu had just been told privately by the North Korean leaders that they had no intention of invading the South, Kim read the Hu-Nakasone meeting as a sign that Peking and its Tokyo-Washington allies intended to "interfere" to deny him a military option. The Hu action represented a direct slap in the face to North Korea.

The widening P.R.C.-North Korea rift would, following Kim's trip to Moscow, lead China for the first time to announce through International Liaison Department advisor Zhang Zingshan that the P.R.C. will not back North Korea if it invades the South. In addition, following the Weinberger visit and the Hu-Nakasone meeting, China not only neglected to attack Japanese "remilitarization," a code word for the Pentagon policy of reestablishing a U.S.-Japanese security relationship as a top priority, but has even recently endorsed it.

Particularly alarming to the North was the P.R.C.'s refusal to attack "Team Spirit '84," the largest joint U.S.-South Korean war games in history. Then, in March 1984, China

publicly accepted Nakasone's assurance that Japanese "militarism" is a thing of the past. Finally, in June 1984, Zhang Aiping, while visiting for the first time his Japanese counterpart, Director of the Japanese Defense Agency Yuko Kurihara, publicly stated that the Japanese-U.S. security treaty is necessary for Japan's defenses—an unprecedented Chinese commitment.

But China's moves were in sharp contrast to Kim's. In January 1984, on the eve of Premier Zhao Ziyang's first visit to the United States, Kim kept his Peking channels open by agreeing to allow the Chinese to tell Reagan that North Korea for the first time would adopt the Chinese formula of three-way talks between the North, the South, and the United States to solve the Korean dispute. However, at the same time Kim was deeply involved in making his major move toward Moscow—a Moscow which had stiffened its Asia policy, showed no yielding in China talks, daily threatened a "remilitarized" Japan, increased the stationing of SS-20 missiles, and decorated those who shot down KAL 007 as heroes.

Moscow was receptive to Kim's feelers. In March 1984, the Soviets gave Kim a 3,000 word TASS interview; there Kim snubbed China by not mentioning it, attacked the U.S.-Japan-South Korea alliance, and praised Moscow for its increasing attacks on Japanese "militarism."

On the eve of Kim's trip to the U.S.S.R., the dynamic of events starting with the early 1983 Chinese airliner defection had crescendoed to put the vital Korean peninsula centerstage in the Asian strategic crisis. Again, straining to keep his channels to Peking open, Kim invited Hu to Pyongyang immediately before his Moscow trip. The North Korean dictatorship arranged the largest welcome for any foreign dignitary in history.

But Hu, carrying a new Chinese policy aimed at disarming the Korean crisis and eliminating North Korea's military option, had little to offer Kim. Then, following Kim's visit to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, North Korea sent out sharp signals that they had swallowed Moscow's bait. To maintain the military option and keep open the possibility of obtaining the much-hoped-for Soviet advanced air capability, Kim is now dancing to Moscow's tune. Immediately following Kim's trip, North Korea announced that it would join the Soviet Union in boycotting the Los Angeles Olympics.

Then, more importantly and in a direct slap at Peking, Kim announced that he would normalize relations with Soviet client Vietnam—relations broken off five years ago with the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea.

Chinese and South Korean sources have told this reporter that they fear how this process is evolving. The South Korean government is so concerned that they are offering to bury the sword on KAL and actively seek talks with Moscow to undercut North Korean inroads. In addition, Seoul has reportedly sought Austrian help in establishing contact with those Eastern European countries Kim visited—particularly East Germany.