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Reading the Egyptian Revolution Through the Lens of US Policy in South Korea Circa 1980: Revelations in US Declassified Documents

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Since early 2011, major peoples' revolutions have swept through North Africa and the Middle East. Most recently, the revolts engulfed Syria and Libya, leading to enormous violence in both countries and a NATO-led bombing campaign in the latter. By far the most important to the United States was the uprising in Egypt, where the military took advantage of a popular insurrection to stage a coup against Hosni Mubarak, a 30-year U.S. ally whose military forces and intelligence services had – and continue to have - extremely close ties to Washington. In August, Mubarak will face trial for corruption and murdering protesters during the uprising that engulfed Cairo's Tahrir Square for 18 days in January. He could face the death penalty if convicted.

Tahrir Square uprising

As the mass and social media beamed the so-called "Arab Spring" around the world, analysts and pundits in the United States quickly began comparing the revolts to past uprisings, particularly those during the Cold War, which had shaken U.S. foreign policy. A favorite topic, particularly on Fox News, was Egypt's purported similarity to the Iranian revolution of 1979, which toppled the pro-US Shah of Iran and eventually led to a Shiite Islamic state hostile to the United States. A few opportunistic neocon voices also compared the Obama administration's public support for Mubarak's opponents to Washington's past actions to pressure Ferdinand Marcos and Suharto to end their dictatorial rule in the Philippines and Indonesia once popular uprisings had already sealed their fate.

But not a single analyst or journalist of note mentioned what remains one of the most significant rebellions against a US-backed tyrant of the past half-century: the student and worker uprising in South Korea in 1979 and 1980, which was mercilessly crushed by the Korean military with the US support. Korea didn't even make the list of near-revolutions: in mid-February, PBS published a list of "30 Years of Uprisings" that had "brought down governments and transformed societies" or were either "dissipated" or "crushed." The list included Iran, the Philippines, the Baltics, China's Tiananmen Square, the 1997 Kosovo Rebellion against Serbia and the 1998 Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela – but unaccountably skipped South Korea as well as Taiwan.

The deletion is perplexing. The South Korean democratic uprising of the 1980s was a transforming event in Korean history. It began with the assassination of dictator Park Chung Hee in October 1979 at the hand of his own CIA director, and culminated in an armed peoples' uprising in May 1980 in the city of Kwangju against the reimposition of military rule by Lt. General Chun Doo Hwan, who put down the rebellion with great force. With Kwangju as its symbol, the uprising climaxed seven years later (1987) in a national revolt that, like Egypt's, brought millions of ordinary citizens into the streets and forced the military to finally relinquish power. In the end, the Korean citizens' movement created one of the most vibrant democracies in East Asia and changed the dynamics of the Cold War in Asia by giving voice to a democratic opposition that called for peace and the end of hostility toward North Korea.

The South Korean experience was also a textbook example of how a US administration deals with the toppling of a dictator who has long been friendly and subordinate to US economic and security interests, and how it handles the delicate task of ostensibly supporting "democracy" while taking steps, publicly and covertly, to maintain the essential elements of a system protective of US interests. The United States played a central role in Kwangju by granting permission to Chun to deploy a Korean Army division from the Joint U.S.-South Korean Command to Kwangju to crush the rebellion.

The Carter administration's strategy as it responded to the Korean events first came to light in a trove of 4,000 declassified documents I obtained over a period of years in the 1990s under the Freedom of Information Act. I released those documents in 1996 and wrote about them in the *Journal of Commerce*, the daily newspaper where I once worked, and the Korean weekly *Sisa Journal*.

Those papers, some of which were further declassified in 2005 with the help of the National Security Archive in Washington, provide a perfect lens to illuminate how the Obama administration may have responded to the events in Egypt this year.

Egypt, Like South Korea, A cornerstone for US Policy

Let's begin this analysis by retracing the recent events in Egypt and its peculiar relationship with the United States. Egypt has long been a cornerstone of US strategy in the Middle East.

Long regarded as the most influential nation in the Middle East, its 1979 peace treaty with Israel made it a major military ally of the United States. From 2001 it would become a major prop in the "global war on terror." Most of its generals and senior officers were trained at US institutions such as the National Defense University and the Army's Command and General Staff College. (The curriculum of the latter, according to the Associated Press, includes "instruction in human rights, the principle of civilian control of the military, the US Constitution and other elements of democracy.") Like South Korea from 1961 to 1987, every Egyptian president since the 1950s has emerged from its military. It currently receives about $1.3 billion per year in US military aid, second only to Israel, and the Pentagon has some 625 personnel stationed in the country to assure peace along the border with Israel and to coordinate weapons sales from General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin and other US weapons suppliers.

Throughout the crisis of January and February 2010, these military relationships were the paramount driving force in US-Egyptian relations. When the peoples' uprisings in Cairo's Tahir Square reached a climax on January 26, the Egyptian High Command, led by Lt. Gen. Sami Hafez Enan, the chief of staff of the Armed Forces, was in Washington meeting with US counterparts at the Pentagon; the visit was cut short as the Egyptian Army began taking up positions in Cairo. While denying formal discussions of the unfolding events, Pentagon officials made clear they had broached the subject several times. As Gen. James Cartright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for example, told the *New York Times* it was hard to ignore the televised footage from Egypt - and therefore he could not discount "hallway" conversations between Egyptian and US commanders.

As the street protests and confrontations with Mubarak supporters intensified over the following week, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen held regular, sometimes daily, telephone meetings with the Egyptian generals. Off the record, they argued (according to the AP) that these close ties helped the Egyptian military "keep its soldiers from attacking protestors seeking to topple" Mubarak.

On February 11, clearly under orders from the military, Mubarak finally called it quits, stepped aside and handed executive power to his appointed vice president (and intelligence chief), Gen. Omar Suleiman. Egypt ever since has been under direct military rule, and a period of relative calm has set in while the restive population prepares for Mubarak's trial and elections later this year. Many of President Obama's public comments, such as his February 12 appeal to the Egyptian Army's "restraint and professionalism" further solidified Washington's ties with the military in a time of turmoil. Yet the situation was far from settled. Even as Mubarak was fleeing Cairo in the early days of the revolt, the Egyptian army was warning workers and newly formed independent unions against work stoppages in a bid to end the biggest wave of strikes in the country's history, ranging from state-owned textile mills to the public sector to the Suez Canal. In February, the Army used force for the first time to stop a demonstration in Tahir Square. Over the spring, with the state of emergency still in effect, Army police arrested thousands of people for taking part in illegal demonstrations and began trying them before military courts. Many protesters claim to have been tortured, with some female activists subjected to "virginity tests" and other humiliations, according to press reports (See especially "Once the Darling of Egypt's Revolt, the military is under Scrutiny," New York Times, April 9, 2011). Much of the public anger was directed against Army Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, a former ally of Mubarak who heads the military's ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

US Army Black Hawk Helicopters lift off from Cairo West Air Base During Bright Star Joint Military Exercise, Oct 6, 1999

Mubarak and Obama

Gen. Tantawi in Tahrir Square before lifting martial law

On the other hand, that council has moved decisively to shift the balance of power away from the cronies of the past to the democrats of the present. Many observers agree that it is slowly moving to create an environment for the eventual transition to a civilian democratic system. And activists continue to use that space to press the military to reform Egypt's security forces, limit executive power and make moves to improve the economic situation for the majority of Egyptians. And in keeping with the popular will, the military is studying the possibility of normalizing relations with Iran, re-evaluatin Egypt's complicated relationship with Israel, and more overtly supporting the cause of Palestinian rights and independence. (see "Egypt's Evolving Foreign Policy," Foreign Policy in *Focus*).

The situation nevertheless remains precarious. In July, Tahrir Square remains the scene of daily demonstrations and occupations organized by groups demanding the swift prosecution of former Mubarak officials. Anger is particularly strong towards security officials responsible for the more than 850 protesters killed by security forces during the February storm. In the summer of 2011, Egypt may be at the dawn of a new, democratic age – or amidst the calm before a major political storm.

So far, apart from the disclosure of US diplomatic cables on Field Marshal Tantawi and other figures dating back to pre-revolutionary times, neither WikiLeaks nor the media have disclosed the behind-the-scenes dealing between the Obama administration, the Pentagon and US intelligence and their counterparts in the Egyptian military and security apparatus. That will fall to future historians and enterprising journalists. But we have a possible model for what could be happening in my FOIA documents on South Korea, which portray US decision-making at the highest level of government and the military at a similar crossroad in the Korean democratic upsurge of 1979 and 1980.

In addition to President Carter, the key players in the drama were the late Richard Holbrooke, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser. I'll begin the narrative with a recap of the Korean events; but first, some observations about the comparison.

Obviously South Korea and Egypt today share little in common in their demographics and history. One is an East Asian economic powerhouse; the other the largest country in the Arab world. But there are similarities. Both have histories of colonial rule: South Korea (prior to the country's division) by Japan, and Egypt by France and Britain. Both have powerful military establishments that were battle-hardened from confrontations with strong adversaries – North Korea and Israel. For decades, their respective militaries ruled the nation, and both maintained close ties with the Pentagon, relationships that run deep at all levels, from the high command to their special forces. There was one big difference, however. Unlike Egypt, South Korea's military was hardened by fighting on the US side, first in the US-Korea War, then in the US-Indochina Wars. But above all, there is a unique command structure. Since 1978, South Korean forces are commanded by a U.S. general with a South Korean as deputy commander, making the ROK the only country in the world in which a foreign general holds such a position.

The command structure explained by US Forces Korea

And, as in all revolutions, there are strong commonalities. In both cases, the sparks were years of brutal police state tactics, labor repression an economic downturn that hurt and enraged the working class. That is the context for understanding South Korea's upsurge in 1979 and 1980.

THE SOUTH KOREAN POLITICAL UPHEAVAL OF 1979

By the fall of 1979, Park Chung Hee, a general who was trained in the Imperial Japanese Army, had ruled South Korea with an iron hand for 18 years. Although the country's export-oriented industrial economy had made huge leaps during those years, government decisions to invest in heavy industry, such as steel and shipbuilding, had led to overcapacity at a time when the world economy was slowing down as a result of the Arab oil embargo. In the late 1970s, runaway inflation bit deep into workers' meager wages, sparking a rise in labor unrest.

Park's "Yushin," or "revitalizing," constitution, unilaterally imposed in 1972, allowed Park to rule the country virtually by decree. But with the growth of the industrial labor force and student population, mounting organized opposition challenged the dictatorship. Dissidents were routinely arrested and tortured. By 1978, students, intellectuals and Christians were pressing for a more open political system including direct elections for president. Meanwhile, the oppressive conditions in the low-wage shoe, garment and textile industries led workers to secretly organize unions. As Park's secret police broke up their meetings and arrested and brutalized their leaders, frustration mounted.

In August 1979, tensions reached a boiling point when a group of female garment workers organized a sit-in at the offices of the opposition New Democratic Party headed by Kim Young Sam. After two weeks of tense negotiation, Park ordered riot police to storm the building. Protesting workers and lawmakers were brutally beaten, and one young woman worker was killed, reportedly after being thrown out of a window. Afterward, an agitated Kim Young Sam, in an interview with the *New York Times*, denounced Park and called on the United States to cut off all ties with the dictator. A few days later, Kim was expelled from the National Assembly. William Gleysteen, the US ambassador, was briefly recalled to Washington to protest Kim's expulsion.

The actions against Kim Young Sam, who later became president, sparked widespread demonstrations in the port city of Pusan, his home town, and the nearby industrial zone at Masan. For the first time, industrial workers joined students in the streets in mass demonstrations. This time, Park sent Army tanks and Special Forces to put down the unrest. In the midst of the turmoil, on October 26, 1979, Park was assassinated by Kim Jae Kyu, the director of the Korean CIA. Kim later explained that he shot the dictator because he feared Park's brutal tactics would spark a revolution. The military responded to the assassination by extending martial law throughout the country and dispatching troops to occupy Seoul and other large cities. The Carter administration warned North Korea not to intervene and quickly dispatched aircraft carriers and early warning aircraft to the Korean peninsula to back up its threat. These events set the stage for the Korean Crisis of 1979 and 1980.

Establishing the Cherokee Communication Channel

For Carter and his national security team, South Korea was one piece in a global crisis triggered by the Iranian revolution of 1978 and the collapse of the Shah, America's key ally in the Middle East. Just two months before Park was assassinated, Iranian radicals had seized the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, sparking the hostage crisis that haunted the administration until, literally, Carter's last hours in office. Tensions were simultaneously high with the Soviet Union, which had invaded Afghanistan in December 1979.

Carter's increasingly hard line was also reflected in South Korea. In June 1979, the president came to Seoul to strengthen U.S.-South Korean military ties. Carter formally announced cancellation of his campaign pledge to pull all U.S. ground forces out of South Korea. Just one week before Park's assassination, and in the midst of wide-spread unrest in Pusan and nearby Masan, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown was in Seoul meeting with Park's top generals and unveiling a plan to sell South Korea 36 F-16 fighter jets, deploy new squadrons of A-10 bombers and transfer two artillery battalions to augment U.S. Army helicopter units. The moves, the pro-government *Korea Herald* reported, would "reinforce deterrence against aggression by North Korea" and "provide tangible evidence of the United States' steadfastness and resolve."

But Park's death and the ensuing political chaos in Seoul disrupted the administration's carefully laid plans. In the months following the assassination, tensions erupted between the martial law authorities in the ROK Army and the democratic opposition. It was led by Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, the symbolic leader of the dissidents who had recently been freed from house arrest. The dissidents and their supporters among Koreans in the United States saw Park's death as a golden opportunity to push for the complete dismantling of Park's hated dictatorial system and a return to electoral politics (in the last presidential election, in 1971, Kim Dae Jung narrowly lost to Park and was nearly killed in an automobile accident that most Koreans assumed was planned by the KCIA. Later, he was kidnapped from his hotel in Tokyo and almost executed at sea before the United States, through the CIA, intervened to keep him alive).

The growing unrest alarmed the Carter administration, which feared that a political confrontation between the generals and the rising opposition could undermine the military alliance with Seoul and spark another regional crisis for the United States. In this context Carter and his national security advisers created a tight circle of experts to monitor and influence the situation in South Korea. Their classified communications channel was code-named Cherokee. Many of the cables I had declassified were part of this channel and became the basis for my 1996 reporting. A few years ago, I succeeded in further declassifying a dozen more of the Cherokee cables, and I report on them here for the first time.

The secret channel was established by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance on November 6, 1979, about two weeks after Park's assassination. The text reads as follows: [passages in square brackets are my explanations]:

1. Secret, Entire Text
2. In order to assure candid high-level exchange of information and recommendations on evolving ROK political situation and how USG can best encourage positive outcome, we are establishing a privacy series with this message.
3. Direct Washington distribution will be controlled by S[ecretary of State] and will include only S[ecretary Vance], D[eputy Secretary Warren Christopher] and EA [East Asia – Holbrooke]. In turn, EA will hand carry to NSC [National Security Council, where the intelligence liaison was Donald Gregg, the former CIA Chief of Station in Seoul] and will, as necessary, inform other key officials.
4. Embassy [in Seoul] should not use this channel for normal reporting of events, but only for those messages requiring unusual sensitivity in handling.
5. In order to distinguish from other NODIS [no distribution – one of the highest classifications possible] traffic on Korea, messages in this privacy series should be slugged NODIS CHEROKEE and begin subject line with the two words "Korea Focus."

With that, the Carter administration began a series of diplomatic cables that became, after they were declassified under FOIA, my own private WikiLeaks of sorts long before the term Wiki was invented or the Internet existed. Many of them were written from Seoul by U.S. Ambassador William H. Gleysteen, a veteran diplomat who grew up in China as the child of missionaries and served in the Ford Administration as Deputy Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Gleysteen, who passed away in 2002, granted me two long interviews in 1996. From the first day of the crisis, he told me, Korea policy was handled by a small group of officials from the White House and State Department. In addition, the CIA and the Pentagon were "brought in at high levels." The secrecy, "a normal proclivity in a crisis," was necessary to deal with the complex military, economic and political issues at stake in Korea, he explained. One can imagine a similar network of officials today, under the leadership of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Obama's intelligence adviser John Brennan, monitoring – and trying to influence – their military allies in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East.

In a revealing aside, Gleysteen told me that the Korean crisis of 1980 was one of the few times in his career when inter-agency policy ran smoothly. One reason for that, he said, was because both the State and Defense departments had good access to President Carter, who "was following events as a telegram reader." At the White House, "you just pushed the Korea button and the door opened," he recalled. Yet, strangely, the events in South Korea and the horror of Kwangju don't rate a single mention in Carter's detailed memoir of his presidency, *White House Diary* – an omission I find disgraceful for a man who continues to position himself – quite rightly – above all by his accomplishments after leaving the Oval Office - as a peacemaker in Korea and a champion of human rights and democracy.

THE CHEROKEE FILES

The first documents of interest in the Cherokee series contain the secret minutes of the first meetings between the Carter foreign policy team (led at first by Cyrus Vance, with Brzezinski playing an essential role) and the Korean government (led by figurehead president Choi Kyu-ha and foreign minister Park Tong-jin) after the Park assassination.

These meetings established what would become firm U.S. policy over the next year: Ambassador Gleysteen led an effort to help the South Korean generals and the (unelected) civilian politicians running the government maintain political "stability" while counseling the opposition movement to "moderate" their demands for open presidential elections and an end to Park's emergency decrees, and to keep a lid on public protests.

This plan turned out to be chimerical. It was also the height of political arrogance: continuation of the dictatorship without Park, and continued US dominance, was hardly attractive for a well-educated and industrious people who had lived through 18 years of draconian police-state rule and had gained political maturity in the anti-dictatorship movement. Moreover, it was clear to those who crafted the policy that the dissident movement had every right to claim a mandate: as Gleysteen admits in one NODIS cable in March 1980, the opposition would "win decisively" if an open, fair election were to be held at that time. Specifically, said Gleysteen: in a cable entitled "Yet another assessment of ROK stability and political development,"

> Prevailing opinion is that the NDP [opposition party] would sweep any election conducted in the near future because of a natural reaction to the Yushin period...The NDP's rather unquestioned advantage is that it would probably win decisively if a popularity contest were conducted in present circumstances, and its great liability is the undisguised distrust of the military leaders (though not necessarily the troops).

The first cable on the post-assassination meetings, "Korea Focus – Secretary's Discussion with Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin November 3, 1979," shows the extent of disarray within the Korean government at the time and underscores how the Korean authorities, from the beginning of the crisis, tried to preserve the status quo while recognizing the deep public dissatisfaction with Park's rule. And they starkly illustrate South Korea's complete dependence at the time on U.S. military support and strategic assistance. Consider these comments from the foreign minister, which were excised in the first cable I obtained but included when I asked for further declassification in 2005. Speaking of the South Korean population, Park said (italics are mine):

Their first concern is the maintenance of national security against the North, and then stability at home in politics and economics. Whatever changes may occur in the future, they want to see them made peacefully and in an orderly manner. They see that there are three evils to be avoided:

- No political reprisals against those who have worked for President Park under the Yushin Constitution and being identified with the previous system. *If the opposition forces take over, this danger exists.*
- A military takeover. The Korean people do not want to see this.
- The previous Yushin system blindly followed and preserved is also something people want to avoid.

How to avoid these is the big question. To help you understand and analyze the situation, Mr. Secretary, let me list a number of influential sectors in our political system:

- The Armed Forces
- The forces of the opposition political groups
- College students and intellectuals
- The government in power headed by acting president
- *The influence of the United States.*

Two points to be noted here: first, Korean workers – the vast majority in the country and the people most responsible for the country's much-vaunted "economic miracle" – did not even merit a mention in Park's list of "influential sectors." Second, it is simply stunning to see the foreign minister of a sovereign country admit openly that one of five key sectors in his nation's political system "is the influence" of the United States. Later, in another exchange, Vance, Holbrooke and Gleysteen informed Park how the United States would exercise that influence.

> Secretary Vance: All of us have been impressed with the continuity of civilian control. This has been noted in my country and throughout the world
>
> Foreign Minister Park: If chaos occurs, the armed forces would be tempted to take over. This would hurt the interests of the country. It is the responsibility of the politicians here to prevent the chaos that might prompt the military to intervene. On the other hand, *the opposition forces believe that there is now a new era, and that they will be able to take over the government.*
>
> Secretary Vance: In any contact that we have with the opposition, *we will be careful to counsel moderation.*
>
> Assistant Secretary Holbrooke: Yesterday, after our conversation with you, I called on General [John] Wickham [the Commander of the U.S.-ROK Joint Command]. He assured me that he sensed no desire on the part of the Armed Forces to assume control.
>
> Foreign Minister Park: *Well, our armed forces are very large, and there are many factions.*
>
> Ambassador Gleysteen: You are right to point out the dangers of chaos. You should know that the lower levels of the embassy are already in contact with opposition figures. I will be in contact too. *We are counseling moderation. We can be helpful.*

That same day, Vance and Holbrooke met with Choi Kyu-hah, the figurehead president who took over in the wake of Park's assassination. The secret summary of this meeting makes clear why the Carter administration desired "moderation" on the part of the opposition so as to maintain the status quo. First was the military situation and the stand-off with North Korea. Vance told Choi that the United States was taking extraordinary measures to ensure that the North stayed out of the situation:

> Secretary Vance: Let me assure you at the outset that the commitment of my government to the security of Korea will remain firm and staunch. In addition to the statement and military actions that we took after the assassination to tell North Korea that we would not tolerate adventurism, we also made our intentions clear to both the Soviets and the Chinese. To date, there have been no signs of movement in the North, *but we have intensified our surveillance and the readiness of our forces as a deterrent.* [This unusual reference to US intelligence was edited out of the first batch of documents but included in the 2005 declassification.] My judgment is that the orderly action of the ROK military together with the reaffirmation of our commitment should work to deter aggression.

Later in the conversation, Vance underscored another important factor for US policy-makers: South Korea's value as a market for American exports. At the time, the US Export-Import Bank was considering a massive loan to the Korean government so it could acquire two more nuclear power plants from the US companies Bechtel and Westinghouse – a loan that finally went through a week after the Kwangju massacre. Yet here, just days after the assassination of South Korea's president,Vance tried to make sure that nothing will disrupt the nuclear deal. It's hard to find a more blatant example of the State Department acting as a sales agent for US multinationals:

> Secretary Vance: It is very important to give the people a sense of direction. We recognize the importance of instilling confidence in the international economic community. I thought I would take the opportunity tonight before leaving for the United States to explain in public that we will be continuing close economic cooperation with your country, that the one billion dollar Exim loan will continue...I think that would have a calming effect.

A "calming effect"? On who? Obviously this news would make the corporations involved quite happy. But for the average man or woman in the street in South Korea, borrowing $1 billion to buy US nuclear technology was hardly the first order of business as part of a package that would continue to deny a democratic breakthrough.

Vance's carefully laid plans for "continuity" and "stability" quickly floundered. Over the next few weeks, it became clear to many Korean activists and a few foreign journalists (notably the *New York Times'* Henry Scott-Stokes) that President Choi had virtually no influence over events. Instead, they learned that a new power center was shaping up inside the Korean military, led by a small group of Amy intelligence officers who had been close to Park. Their leader was Lt. Gen. Chun Doo Hwan, the head of the Defense Security Command, the military intelligence unit that led the investigation into Park's assassination at the hands of KCIA Director Kim Jae Kyu. Kim had been very close to the US Embassy and the CIA, and Chun was suspicious that the United States might have played a role in his crime. He also held a virulent hatred for the opposition forces, considering them virtual agents of North Korea. As the dissidents began pushing the limits of martial law by holding small demonstrations and passing out leaflets in public, Chun's forces began arresting and torturing their leaders.

Amb. Gleysteen with Chun Doo Hwan

One incident in particular shocked the dissidents, particularly the Christian opposition groups gathered around Kim Dae Jung and members of the Korean National Council of Churches. In late November 1979, a coalition of dissident groups trying to evade the martial law edicts against public meetings staged an elaborate wedding ceremony at a YWCA building, where several hundred people, including Kim Dae Jung, gathered to discuss the current situation and forge a way forward. All were dressed in wedding clothes. Chun got wind of the meeting and dispatched troops from the Defense Security Command (DSC) to break it up. Whooping in with clubs, they beat many and arrested several dozen people. I later heard stories of the brutality from some of those detained, including the Korean husband of an American missionary. He was brought to DSC headquarters, strapped upside down from the ceiling, and beaten for hours on the soles of his feet; he was still recovering when I met him 18 months later in Seoul.

Reports of the violent attack soon reached the U.S. Embassy and the pages of the *New York Times*, which published a detailed story about the wave of "mass seizures" of Christian students and activists, including the arrest of over 100 activists on November 27, 1979 at the headquarters of the National Council of Churches. In this article, the *Times* referred to the mock "wedding" at the YWCA, reporting that the latest arrests "followed the detention of 96 people after an anti-Government meeting at the Young Women's Christian Association building." Reporter Henry Scott-Stokes went on to detail the depth of the crackdown:

> Informed sources believe that many hundreds of political prisoners actually are in Government custody now. In addition to those arrested most recently, many people were detained after martial law was imposed in the southern port of Pusan and Masan following anti-government demonstrations there a week before President Park's assassination.
>
> The number of detainees is mounting daily as students are picked up here [Seoul] for handing out leaflets and staging small meetings. Some Western diplomats [journalese at the time for U.S. embassy officials] say that the period of calm that followed Mr. Park's assassination, when no demonstrations were reported anywhere in South Korea, has been succeeded by widespread unrest. "It looks as if things are turning sour," said one. "It is really sad." ("100 More Arrested by Korean Military," *New York Times*, November 29, 1979).

When the Egyptian secret police began mass arrests of pro-democracy activists in mid-February 2011, the Obama administration publicly criticized the actions and urged the Egyptian authorities to end the repression. Anyone reading the *Times*' coverage of South Korea in the fall of 1979, as well as its daily reports on President Carter's human rights policies, would have expected a similar response from the US administration and its outspoken senior diplomat for East Asia, Richard Holbrooke. But Holbrooke had other fish to fry, as he laid out in a secret NODIS cable to Ambassador Gleysteen on December 3, 1979. He had been meeting with "key" Senators and congressmen "about our strategy," he explained:

> Their attitudes, like everyone else's, are dominated by the Iranian Crisis and, needless to say, *nobody wants "another Iran" – by which they mean American action which would in any way appear to unravel a situation and lead to chaos or instability in a key American ally.*

In other words, the Carter administration would do all it could to keep South Korea "under control" and out of the headlines. But was Holbrooke concerned about the mass arrests, and the brutal crackdown by Chun's Defense Security Command on Christian dissidents that was causing the "situation to unravel"? Hardly; indeed, the Christians were to blame. Holbrooke continued:

> In this connection, we are encouraged by many of the things the Korean leadership has done. At the same time, certain recent events have caused us to share your concern over *the potential polarization that exists as a result of the actions of what appear to be a relative handful of Christian extremist dissidents.*

Holbrooke then instructed Gleysteen to give these Christian "extremists" – as well as the Korean generals - a message from the highest levels of the U.S. government:

> We would like to propose to you a delicate operation designed to use American influence to reduce the chances of confrontation, and to make clear to the generals that you are in fact trying to be helpful to them provided they in turn carry out their commitments to liberalization.
>
> What we have in mind is your sending a clear message to Christian dissidents who are now stirring up street demonstrations and provoking the military into the unfortunate reaction [an interesting choice of words for officially sanctioned brutality] that has begun to occur and has put almost 200 people into jail in the last two weeks. The message to the dissidents, which you could deliver through whatever

> means you felt was most appropriate, should be understood as coming from the U.S. government. It would be that, *in this delicate time in Korean internal politics, the United States believes that demonstrations in the streets are a throwback to an earlier era and threaten to provoke retrogressive action on the part of the Korean government. Even when these are in fact not demonstrations, but rather just meetings in defiance of martial law, the U.S. government views them as unhelpful while martial law is still in effect.*

The purpose of Gleysteen's "blunt message," instructed Holbrooke, would be this:

> To alert them to the fact that they should not automatically count on the same degree of American support now that they might have had a few months ago. Our priority is on the development of a political process. Secondly, and equally important, we would propose that you discuss the message you are going to send to the Christian dissidents with the key military and civilian leadership of the government prior to sending it. This would have the positive effect of showing the leadership that you are definitely trying to help them moderate the situation.

It would be difficult to find a statement of more stunning arrogance and stupidity in misreading of the political pulse of a nation in the annals of American diplomacy. Yet this came from a man who, since his death, has been hailed as one of the visionaries of American foreign policy and representative of the country's highest ideals.

In an interview with Ambassador Gleysteen, I showed him Holbrooke's cable and asked if he'd followed up on Holbrooke's advice. "No, that was too tricky," Gleysteen replied. "This was an armchair suggestion from Washington, something we just couldn't do." Yet Gleysteen did continue to press Korean dissidents to take a "moderate" approach to the military and avoid confrontation. While warning the military to be tolerant, "on the left, we tried to get the message across to the moderates that they should keep down their inflammatory actions," Gleysteen told me. This effort was so successful, he said, that by December 1979, "people were beginning to talk about a 'Seoul Spring'" as Kim Dae Jung was released from prison and other dissidents were freed to take part in political activities.

The Korean military group under Chun Doo Hwan had other plans, however. On the night of December 12, 1979, Chun pulled off a spectacular coup within the South Korean armed forces that not only put him in charge of the military but violated the chain of command established by the U.S. and ROK armies. As Ambassador Gleysteen and General Wickham monitored the events from an embassy bunker, Chun ordered his Army classmate General Roh Tae Woo (who would later succeed Chun as president) to pull his Ninth Division from the border with North Korea and attack the Seoul Garrison where the martial law command was located. After a brief firefight, the top martial law commander was arrested; Chun was now in de facto control of the ROK military. The internal coup stunned the U.S. military and the Carter administration, both of which were acutely aware that internal division within the Iranian military had been a key factor in the 1978 collapse of the Shah.

But the incident was quickly papered over, sending a signal to Chun Doo Hwan and his military allies that they were virtually untouchable by the United States no matter what they did. The deal – which involved the Carter administration staying silent about Chun's unprecedented breach of bilateral military protocol as long as the ROK government kept to a vague schedule of political reform – was forged in a December 18 meeting in Washington between Holbrooke and the South Korean ambassador and spelled out in a December 19 NODIS/CHEROKEE cable from Vance to Ambassador Gleysteen. In the meeting, the Korean ambassador supplied the "official" explanation for the "12/12 Incident," as it came to be called: that it resulted from the "unfortunate resistance" of the martial law commander's guards to "the officers sent to question the chief of staff about evidence possibly linking him" to Park's assassination. In response, said Holbrooke:

> He found the ROKG message reassuring and hoped that it would be possible to carry out the commitment to broadly based political development. *He assured Amb. Kim that the USG would not publicly contest the ROKG version of recent events, but we would not wish to see further military changes of command "Korean style"...* The ROK can be assured that we stand beside Korea as firm allies, but efforts are now required to restore ROK military unity and to restore the necessary mutual trust between the U.S. and ROK armed forces. This mutual trust had been seriously damaged by the direct action of some generals last week.

The "deal" was cemented in early January 1980 in a letter to President Choi from President Carter (this document was declassified in 1986 and made available to me by Don Oberdorfer, a former reporter for the *Washington Post* and the author of *The Two Koreas*.) In the letter, Carter promised that the United States would assist the Korean president "as you undertake the important tasks of political reconciliation and constitutional change." But the letter included a blunt warning about the 12/12 Incident:

> I must emphasize that I was deeply distressed by the events of December 12-13. Ambassador Gleysteen and General Wickham have made clear to you and senior members of your government why the United States has been so concerned over strife within the Korean Army…I have been particularly disquieted by the breach of the chain of command in the ROK Army…Any further disregard for [the Combined Forces Command structure] and the commitments they embody would have serious consequences for our close cooperation.

But in the midst of this bluster, Carter made sure that the Korean president understood that he would help sweep the 12/12 Incident under the rug: "Please be assured that we will work with you to try to minimize the political damage," Carter wrote. Over the next few months, the Carter administration publicly urged "moderation" on both the military and the dissident movement. But Chun understood very clearly that he was at liberty to maintain "stability" and keep the situation from becoming a political liability for the United States while continuing to amass power for himself and his allies within the Korean Armed Forces. Carter's letter cemented any doubts that President Choi might have had about who was actually in charge: Chun and his US allies.

A Green Light for Chun Doo Hwan

Over the spring of 1980, students intensified protests on campus and off, demanding democratization in the country's universities and pressing for political liberalization and direct elections in street demonstrations. As in Egypt just before Mubarak's fall, workers throughout Korean industry began wildcat strikes seeking higher wages, better working conditions and free and democratic trade unions. Much of the workers' rage was directed against pro-government union leaders who worked with employers and the security forces to limit the protests. In one incident, miners in a remote town called Sabuk seized their mine from the owners and took the union "president" and his wife hostage; for the first time since the Pusan demonstrations in October 1979, Chun dispatched Special Forces to put down the protest. For Chun and South Korea's ruling circles, the situation was spinning out of control. In April Chun took direct control of the Korean CIA. Both the military and South Korea's most feared intelligence agency were now run by the same man.

By May of 1980, the situation had reached a boiling point. Students began mobilizing huge demonstrations in downtown Seoul, demanding that Chun step down and calling on the National Assembly to set a timetable for democratic rule and direct elections. Seoul in those days closely resembled Cairo in mid-February, with hundreds of thousands of people in the streets facing thousands of riot police. As the situation intensified, the Carter administration decided that the unrest had become a threat to U.S. interests in the region and might tempt North Korea to intervene in some way. These conclusions set the scene for the most damning cables in the Cherokee series.

On May 8, 1980, Ambassador Gleysteen met with Chun and then traveled to the Blue House – Seoul's equivalent of the White House – to meet with Choi

Kwang Soo, the top aide to President Choi and a key liaison with Chun. Just before the meeting, Gleysteen cabled Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who had been handling crisis management since Cyrus Vance resigned in April to protest Carter's disastrous decision to send paramilitary forces on a failed mission to rescue the Iranian hostages.

Gleysteen noted that "the students are proceeding remorselessly with their challenge to law and order and appear to be doing so with a great deal of coordination and direction." Meanwhile, "the government is determined to maintain order, if necessary, with troops but is highly conscious of the enormous dangers involved." Gleysteen concluded: "*In none of our discussions will we in any way suggest that the USG (U.S. government) opposes ROKG (Republic of Korea government) contingency plans to maintain law and order, if absolutely necessary, by reinforcing the police with the army*." This message – essentially a green light to use troops from the Combined Forces Command against student demonstrations – was communicated to both Chun Doo Hwan and the Blue House, Gleysteen later told me.

The message was well understood in Washington. Within hours of Gleysteen's cable, Christopher sent a NODIS/CHEROKEE cable back to Seoul commenting on the ambassador's analysis. Amazingly, Christopher only now expressed interest in what was behind the massive demonstrations in Seoul:

> We note with concern your conclusion that tensions are now rising and government tolerance perhaps lessening. There have been anomalous aspects to many of these student demonstrations; do you have any indication as to who is stirring the pot and why?

But the answer didn't really matter; Christopher had already endorsed the message that the Korean military had no choice but to crack down on these "anomalous" protests:

> We agree that we should not oppose ROK contingency plans to maintain law and order, but you should remind Chun and Choi of the dangers of escalation if law enforcement responsibilities are not carried out with care and restraint.

Gleysteen wrote back in another NODIS/CHEROKEE cable, noting the high stakes involved but reassuring Christopher that he had told both the Korean government and the military that a military crackdown might be unavoidable. Speaking of his meeting at the Blue House, Gleysteen wrote (in a cable that was fully declassified in 2005):

> Choi said that the president was determined to do his utmost to avoid the use of the Army in controlling the students, although contingency plans had been made. More than 12,000 combat police had been distributed throughout Seoul, many of them newly trained or drawn from coastal guard duty now being covered by the Army…If all the government's exhortation failed to deter the students, the government would seriously consider closing the schools if this would facilitate police control of the situation.
>
> Choi was also uneasy about the labor situation, proud of the way the govt had handled the Sabuk mine riot, and rather pleased with the successful quashing of violence at four major industrial plants in Inchon, Seoul and Pusan. Yet the government was very concerned because there was evidence of radical troublemakers and all the settlements so far tended to undercut the government's ability to hold down wage increases in an effort to check inflation.

After hearing Choi "lash out passionately" at Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam, Gleysteen continued:

> I commented that we, of course, understood the government's need to maintain law and order and to make contingency plans to use of the military as an instrument of last resort. Nevertheless, I was pleased to hear that President Choi and General Chun were so reluctant to use the military because of the danger of killings and a rapid erosion of public support. I urged that the greatest care be used in dealing with ringleaders or politicians who were suspected of being unhelpful. As long as the government would continue its present caution, I promised to do our best to try to talk sense into Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam.

Thus the scene was set for the tragedy and massacre in Kwangju – and, despite the terrible violence that occurred in that city, continued U.S. support for Chun Doo Hwan.

The Kwangju Uprising

Chun Doo Hwan waited only a week before playing his contingency card. On the night of May 17, 1980, he declared martial law and sent the Army to occupy South Korea's major universities and most important cities. Hundreds of student leaders were arrested, as were both Kims. The dreaded Special Forces — the only Korean troops not directly under the control of the US-ROK Joint Command — were deployed as well (see my original stories from the *Journal of Commerce* and *Sisa Journal*, linked above, for details on Special Forces deployments).

But in Kwangju, a city in South Korea's southwestern Cholla Province well-known for its resistance to centralized, authoritarian rule, students continued to defy the martial law edicts. On May 18, Chun's troops were apparently warned by their commanders that a communist revolution was unfolding in Kwangju that could infect the whole country and inspire North Korea to invade. In response, they began a two-day rampage through the city. In broad daylight, they began beating, bayoneting and shooting anyone who dared to stand up to martial law. Bystanders too were attacked – some of them chased into their homes and killed.

Horrified and angered by the actions of the storm troopers, the people of Kwangju – most of them skilled in firearms because of males' mandatory stints in the army – formed a citizens' militia and started shooting back. After two days of combat and hand-to-hand fighting in which dozens of people were killed and wounded, Chun's Special Forces turned tail and pulled out of the city. It was the first armed insurrection in modern South Korean history since the Korean War. (There were, as Bruce Cumings and Charles Armstrong have pointed out, several significant armed insurrections in the late 1940s, including those at Yosu and Jeju Island). A citizens' committee, made up of armed insurrectionists, clergy and civic leaders, sought desperately to negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis.

On May 22, Carter's national security team gathered at the White House for a high-level meeting on the crisis. They met less than 12 hours after hundreds of thousands of armed students, industrial workers, taxi drivers, students and citizens in Kwangju had gathered in their downtown plaza to celebrate the liberation of their city from the two divisions of Special Forces who had been sent to quell their protests. The city was a liberated zone, at peace with itself and its citizens working to help the wounded, bury the dead, keep order and distribute food and water. They looked to the United States to act honorably and respect their desire to bring to bring an end to military rule. But, as the declassified minutes of the May 22 meeting make clear, the die had already been cast.

To get the full flavor of this meeting, it's important to remember that, as Carter's Korea team met at the White House, Holbrooke and others had already been informed in detail about what had happened in Kwangju. The few foreign media in the city had managed to transmit stories of the savage brutality inflicted by the Special Forces on the city's population, especially its youth. The secret cables from the US Embassy in Seoul to the State Department that I later obtained *confirmed that massacres had indeed taken place and were the primary cause of the uprising.* The Defense Intelligence Agency, in other documents I obtained, warned that the Special Forces were fully capable of vicious cruelty and that Chun was secretly planning to use the Kwangju incident to seize

power.

None of that seemed to matter: Carter's White House prioritized the preservation of US national security interests not the democratic impulses of a Korean population rebelling after 18 years of dictatorship. As the citizens of Kwangju mourned their dead and waited for signs of hope, Carter's team decided to support Chun's plan to crush the rebellion by force.

The participants in the meeting included Christopher; Holbrooke; Brzezinski; CIA director Admiral Stansfield Turner; Donald Gregg, the NSC's top intelligence official for Asia and a former CIA Station Chief in Seoul; and U.S. Defense Secretary Harold Brown. This crack foreign policy team quickly came to a consensus. "The first priority is the restoration of order in Kwangju by the Korean authorities with the minimum use of force necessary without laying the seeds for wide disorders later," the minutes stated. "Once order is restored, it was agreed we must press the Korean government, and the military in particular, to allow a greater degree of political freedom to evolve." The May 8 promise to Chun to allow troops from the joint command to put down any rebellion was repeated:

> We have counseled moderation, but have not ruled out the use of force, should the Koreans need to employ it to restore order.

Another key passage underscored the gravity of the situation.

> Secretary [of State Edmund] Muskie asked the Defense Department to take additional planning steps to prepare for "worst case scenarios" which could develop. Specifically, he asked that DoD prepare recommendations for what should be done if there is a pattern of spreading violence outside of Kwangju and, secondly, what the Defense Department would recommend if ROK redeployments to internal security duty continued to the point where the counter-North Korea mission of the joint command was endangered.

Brzezinski summed up the U.S. position: "in the short term support, in the longer term pressure for political evolution." As for the situation in Kwangju, having just decided to authorize the use of military force, the group declared that "we have counseled moderation, but have not ruled out the use of force, should the Koreans need to employ it to restore order." If there was "little loss of life" in the recapture of the city, "we can move quietly to apply pressure for more political evolution," the officials decided. Once the situation was cleared up, the war cabinet agreed, normal economic ties could move forward – including the Export-Import Bank loan to South Korea to buy American nuclear power equipment and engineering services.

Within hours of the meeting, the US commander in Korea gave formal approval to the Korean military to remove a division of Korean troops under the US-Korean Joint Command and deploy them to Kwangju. The city and its surrounding towns had already been cut off from all communications by a tight military cordon. Military helicopters began flying over the city urging the Kwangju urban army – which had taken up positions in the provincial capital building in the middle of the city – to surrender. At one point, a Kwangju citizens' council asked the US ambassador, William Gleysteen, to intervene to seek a negotiated truce. The request was coldly rejected. These actions were a stunning blow to the Kwangju resistance and to the few Koreans – including some in the United States – who were aware of the terrible events unfolding in the city; not only was the United States abetting a military coup, it was directly involved in putting down the democratic resistance.

In the early morning of May 27, the Korean troops from the Joint Command shot their way into the provincial capital and quickly crushed the resistance. The Kwangju Commune was shut down, and hundreds of people who had participated were rounded up and imprisoned. Apparently, the "loss of life" was not enough to disrupt normal business for Washington (the final toll remains in dispute, but most accounts agree that at least 200 people were killed and over 2,500 seriously injured). In early June, Carter's team approved the Eximbank loan, and South Korea went ahead with its plan to buy US nuclear technology from Westinghouse and Bechtel. By September 1980, Chun was president, and in January 1981 he was chosen by incoming President Reagan as the first foreign head of state to visit the White House. US-Korean ties were restored, and a crisis averted.

Military leads Kwangju demonstrators away

But not for the people of South Korea. Partly because of the decisions made at that White House meeting, they endured eight more years of military dictatorship. Over the 1980s, however, a mass movement, with Kwangju as its symbol, spread throughout South Korea, culminating in 1987 with huge demonstrations in Seoul and other cities that drew millions of people. In 1997, the democratic movement reached an apex when Kim Dae Jung, the longtime dissident leader (and a Kwangju native) was elected president of South Korea. Prior to his election, Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo were tried for treason and murder in connection with the events in Kwangju; both were convicted, and their sentences were commuted by Kim once he became president (in 1985 I interviewed Kim about Kwangju – read that interview, which was the only time he spoke publicly about the US role in the uprising, here).

I asked Holbrooke once about his role in US diplomacy at the time, particularly the decision to allow the Korean military to use force to end the student-worker unrest and the Kwangju Uprising. The question infuriated him, and he virtually spat out his words: "Kwangju was an explosively dangerous situation, the outcome was tragic, but the long-term results for Korea are democracy and economic stability," he informed me. He added: "The idea that we would actively conspire with the Korean generals in a massacre of students is, frankly, bizarre; it's obscene and counter to every political value we articulated." When the Carter Administration heard Chun was sending Special Forces to Kwangju, "we made every effort to stop what was happening," Holbrooke said. That was a flat-out lie, as the released documents show.

Ironically, the most honest answer about what drove US policy during this time came from a CIA agent who was in South Korea during this time. In 1983, a former CIA case officer showed up at an academic forum on Korea where I was speaking about Kwangju with Bruce Cumings, the author of several excellent books about the Korean War and the US role in the Korean peninsula. I believe that Cumings identified the man as CIA and told him that it was only fair for him to say who he was and why he was there. The agent, Robert Muldoon, rose slowly, and in a halting voice explained how the Carter administration was initially confused by the power struggle that broke out in South Korea after Park's assassination. But in the end, he said, Carter opted for national security.

"We looked at this as a situation in which there was a political vacuum, there was a struggle for power among Korean factions, and I think the conclusion that we came to was that the strongest political force in South Korea was the Korean Army," he declared. A few years ago, Donald Gregg, a career CIA officer who, as US ambassador to Seoul during the 1980s, visited Kwangju, gave me a similar assessment. "For us to have broken publicly with Chun would have been a categorically different signal than we'd ever sent to the Korean peninsula," he told me. That may be true – but the cost to the US-Korean relationship, and above all to the Korean people, was incalculable.

So what's the lesson for Egypt? Clearly the Obama administration reached the same conclusion about its army in Egypt that the Carter administration did about the Korean military: that it is the only cohesive force with the ability to hold Egypt together in the service of US power. As they did with Korea, US officials today are meeting constantly with their Egyptian counterparts in government and above all the military. Having belatedly recognized that Mubarak must go, they probably counsel "moderation" on the part of the ruling military and the democratic opposition to assure that the situation doesn't spin out of control in ways that could jeopardize the primacy of US power in Egypt. As of early July 2011, it's too early to say what the final outcome will be as the army and the social movements—with varying emphases on democracy, labor rights, and religious orientation—vie to define Egypt's future. With huge US oil and geostrategic interests in the region, will the United States this time consider the Egyptian people in the equation?

In Korea in 1979 and 1980, the hopes and dreams of the Korean people for democratic reform were trampled in the name of US national security. The result was the tragedy of Kwangju and eight years of the savage Chun dictatorship. Three decades later, with the US enmeshed in unpopular and destabilizing wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, and on the verge of going to war in Libya, it remains to be seen whether the Obama administration can learn from the bitter lessons of 1980 Korea and support the forces of democratic progress over the continued grip of the military.

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Note on sources: A terrific bibliography on the Kwangju Uprising can be found at the activist website "Gusts of Popular Feeling" here. It includes books as well as many articles and manuscripts. Readers can also find my original reporting on the Kwangju FOIA documents at my website here and here. Click here for my 1986 interview with Kim Dae Jung in which the former president and democratic leader discussed, for the first and only time in public, his views on the Kwangju Uprising and the U.S. response.

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