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Boogak Mansion 1-203
Pyungchang Dong
Chungno Ku
Seoul 110, Korea
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A Footnote to History: Kim Dae-jung Arrives Home

Mr. Peter Bird Martin, Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, N.H. 03755

Dear Peter,

The Korean Foreign Ministry has now formally apologized to the United States for the scuffle at the airport when Kim Dae-jung returned to Korea on February 8th. A couple of U.S. Congressmen were roughed up by Korean police, who prevented three American diplomats from greeting them at the plane, as had been previously agreed upon. The State Department now says the incident is "closed," and that should relegate the affair to its rightful place as a minor footnote to history. But like many minor footnotes, this one is very telling.

The fracas will not have much impact on Korean history. Most Koreans have no idea anything untoward happened at the airport, despite the presence of large numbers of Korean reporters. Some reporters even spent the night at the airport to avoid being turned back by police the next morning. They were never allowed to print their stories.

The only ordinary Koreans who found out about the event were the ones who understood English and happened to tune in the U.S. military TV station, which broadcasts satellite relays of American network news. The government never even announced domestically that it had received a formal diplomatic protest over the affair from the U.S. government.

Now that it has been apologized to, the State Department seems glad to let Korea off the hook. And in truth, a couple of liberal congressmen getting pushed around is not the sort of thing you would want to let foul up the general good state of U.S.-Korean relations. Kim Dae-jung did arrive home more or less safely--with ruffled feathers, but nothing broken or bruised.

Despite the incident's historic insignificance, though, it highlights with uncanny clarity much that is true about Korea that many people would like to cover up. Despite significant domestic liberalization in the past four years, despite a real victory for the opposition in the February elections, the U.S. continues to have an exceptionally close political and military relationship with a government that fundamentally does not share the same values. The best efforts of both governments to hide that truth broke down embarrassingly under the glare of television lights last February 8th.

Steven B. Butler is a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs studying political and economic developments in Korea and Northeast Asia.

To rehash a bit of the public record...

Kim Dae-jung, indisputably Korea's leading dissident politician, was arrested on May 17, 1980, when marshall law was declared in Korea. Paratroopers from neighboring Kyongsang Province were sent in to put down street demonstrations in Kwangju, capital city of Kim's home South Cholla Province. The paratroopers brutalized the population, which shortly revolted, threw the troops out of the city, and took control of the city for a week before government troops retook the city in a fairly orderly fashion. Several hundred people died in the incident, over a thousand by some accounts. Kim was accused of inciting the insurrection from his prison cell, and was sentenced to death for sedition. Most all neutral observers agree the charges were fairly far fetched.

Under heavy American pressure, Kim's sentence was commuted to life in prison, and later shortened to 20 years. These moves are believed to have won President Chun Doo-hwan an invitation to visit Washington in 1981, shortly after President Reagan took office.

Kim was later "allowed" to seek medical treatment in the United States in December 1982, a kind of involuntary political exile. His departure for the U.S. removed an enormous thorn in the side of the Korean government. Kim arouses intense emotions in Korea, and he still has a large popular following, especially in his home South Cholla Province. He is also very popular in Seoul, which has a large immigrant population from South Cholla, the poorest region of the country.

Since the beginning of 1984, Kim had indicated he planned to return home. Sometime last fall, he began to enter into indirect, behind-the-scenes negotiations with the Korean government over the timing and circumstances of his return. The Korean government wanted Kim to wait til after national assembly elections to return to the country, and apparently offered to let him go to Europe (Kim's passport was valid only for the United States), and promise his freedom after returning. But in December, when Kim continued to denounce President Chun strongly, calling him a military dictator, the government became angry and called off negotiations, according to Choi Chang-yoon, a presidential political advisor.

In the meantime, the international publicity about Kim's return continued to grow. A delegation of about 20 Americans were going to accompany Kim to assure his safety, including a couple of congressmen, and former Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White. The international news media would turn up in force too, since the case had so many similarities to the return to the Phillipines of Benigno Aquino, less than two years ago. Aquino was assassinated as soon as he stepped off the plane.

Although they denied it all along, the U.S. and Korean governments had begun quietly to make arrangements for handling the return, and the U.S. applied diplomatic pressure on Korea not to put Kim back into prison upon his return.

In mid-January, Presidential advisor Choi let on that the government had decided to put Kim in prison on the grounds that he was a revolutionary, not a politician, and that the American government has been informed of the decision.

Choi's remarks were quickly denied in a statement issued in the Korean embassy in Washington, which said that Choi's remarks were "strictly his personal view." It is very clear, however, that when he spoke, Choi did not think he was giving his personal view, but was informally announcing a government policy. Choi was evidently set up to launch a trial balloon that international public opinion quickly shot down.

At any rate, the Korean government subsequently announced that Kim would not be jailed upon his return and the U.S. and Korean governments quickly reached agreement on how Kim was to get off the plane and go to his house in western Seoul. According to the agreement, three American diplomats from the U.S. Embassy were to be allowed to go to the exit gate of the plane, ostensibly to greet the American congressmen. They would also serve as witnesses for what happened to Kim.

Kim and his wife were supposed to be allowed to exit the plane and go to the customs area with his American escorts. At a later point Kim and his wife and bodyguards would be separated and taken to his house, while a Korean Foreign Ministry car would provide transportation there for the two congressmen and Robert White.

What actually happened is now well known. The American diplomats were prevented from approaching the gate to the plane. Communication broke down, and the delegation accompanying Kim was never aware they were supposed to separate from Kim. When the plane arrived at the airport gate, the delegation sat on the plane some twenty minutes, uncertain of what they should do. The American diplomats never appeared. An immigration official invited the Kims to leave the plane separately, and they refused.

Kim linked arms with Robert White and congressman Thomas Foglietta and proceded off the plane. In the chute to the airport, a wall of police moved in to separate Kim forcibly from most of the accompanying delegation and the reporters who came along for the ride. The police told Kim and his wife to enter an elevator with the four Americans who were still with them. Kim refused to go, saying he had the right, as a Korean citizen, to undergo ordinary customs procedures. The police then forced Kim and his wife into the elevator, tearing them apart from the Americans. White and Foglietta were knocked to the ground, others pushed and shoved, reporters actually picked up with their camera gear and dropped onto an escalator to the customs area. That was the famous scuffle, about which a remarkable number of different versions were told over the next few days, each one more bizarre than the next.

Various Korean and U.S. government statements have attributed the incident to "confusion" or "misunderstanding." But a look beyond the public record shows this could not have been the case.

The first hint of any breakdown in the agreement on deplaning appeared at 9:20 A.M., when the U.S. Embassy received a call from the airport, saying that the diplomats going to the airport would not be given VIP badges which they would need to enter the areas of the airport on the international side of customs clearance. Instead they would have to receive special passes from the Foreign Ministry. The VIP badges are routinely issued to all accredited diplomats to

greet anyone in the airport. In this case, the routine procedure was reinforced by a specific agreement with the Korean Foreign Ministry that three American diplomats would receive the badges on the morning of the 8th.

The three diplomats got into an Embassy car and rode out to the airport, while a phone call from the Embassy to the Foreign Ministry produced an assurance that the agreement was in place, that the diplomats would receive the badges, and that the airport personnel had misunderstood.

When the diplomats arrived at the airport VIP lounge, a young woman manning the desk refused to issue the badges. The diplomats demanded to speak with her superior, and phoned the Foreign Ministry again. After some negotiations, they were issued the badges and assured by the airport protocol officer that they would have access to the plane.

At about 10:45, the hallway outside the VIP lounge had filled up with opposition politicians and newsmen who expected that Kim might come through the VIP entrance. (This despite a remark from one security officer that Kim definitely was not a VIP.) Then police suddenly moved in. They locked the double doors through which access is usually gained to the secure areas of the airport, and set up a wall of plainclothes police around the door.

One of the diplomats phoned the Foreign Ministry and described the situation, at which point the fellow in the Foreign Ministry apologized in embarrassment, said there was nothing he could do, and that the diplomats would not be allowed to greet the congressmen at the plane's door. The diplomat then warned the Foreign Ministry that an incident of serious consequences could develop if they were prevented from greeting the congressmen.

A similar message was delivered to the airport chief of protocol who was asked pointedly how the congressmen would be identified and how they would be led through VIP customs clearance, which they had been promised and which is normal in the case of visiting legislators.

Finally, close to 11:30, one of the diplomats was led through a circuitous route in the airport to the bottom of an escalator, just below the gate to the plane. There, he was told, he could greet the congressmen who were accompanying Kim.

Shortly after 11:30 the plane arrived, and the ordinary passengers came down the escalator in normal fashion. A few minutes passed and the diplomat watched a handful of newsmen being roughly shoved onto the top of the escalator. He tried to go up the escalator but was stopped.

Another moment of quiet ensued, followed by loud shouting. A policeman appeared at the top of the escalator and shouted in Korean to the bottom, "Where are the congressmen?"

The diplomat on the bottom shouted up, "We don't have them! You have them!"

The policeman frowned and shouted back, "You are supposed to have them!" He then ran back from the escalator.

The congressmen and the other VIPs did finally appear on the escalator, pushed and shoved onto it, with open hands flying about, hitting them on the shoulders and backs of the heads.

The protocol officer tried to prevent them from receiving VIP treatment, as had been agreed upon. But the diplomat, angry by then, collected the passports, handed them to the officer, and stomped off.

Charge and counter charge came out later from just about everyone involved in the incident, with Kim Dae-jung himself showing the most restraint. (Kim showed once again his formidable skill as a professional politician.) The Korean government denied any violence had been used, after Pat Derian described the events as "brutal thuggery." The delegates accompanying Kim accused the U.S. Embassy of responsibility for the mishap, while U.S. Ambassador to Korea Richard Walker accused the delegates of provoking the incident.

All of these charges came quickly to have a very boring ring to them, since the scuffle turned out to be a great international media event without significant consequences.

But the events, particularly as just related, say something important about how the Korean government reacts under pressure. The incident could not simply have resulted from "misunderstanding" or "confusion." Rather it resulted from a knowing decision taken by the Korean government to abrogate an agreement it had reached with its closest ally, the United States. On the morning of the 8th, the Korean Foreign Ministry clearly knew it was scrapping the agreement and was embarrassed by it. The eventually apology to the U.S. government further confirms this.

Diplomats in Seoul say that the Presidential security force intervened at the last minute. It scrapped the agreement and changed the scenario for getting Kim through the airport and to his house.

There are two explanations for why that happened. A more sympathetic version of the events says that the security force was genuinely concerned over Kim's safety, less from humanitarian concern than from fear that if Kim were attacked, the Korean government would be blamed. Two days before Kim arrived, a North Korean radio broadcast had been monitored saying that President Chun would have to assume full responsibility for anything that happened to Kim when he arrived in Korea. Some people who heard this broadcast understood it as an implied threat against Kim. A similar-sounding broadcast had been picked up just several days before the Rangoon bombing that killed much of the Korean cabinet. At that time, people ignored the broadcast as more bluster from North Korea. The President's security men may have decided not to take any chances this time around.

There is considerable doubt about that explanation, however. First off, the Korean government never tried to defend its actions by pointing out the North Korean broadcast, and instead tried to deny the whole incident. Second, if the government was genuinely worried about Kim's safety, it is odd that it would lift all special security provisions on Kim less than a month after his return. It did that on March 6th. It is hard to imagine how preventing U.S. diplomats from approaching the plane would enhance Kim's security, or that

the security forces would fear for Kim's life inside the airport, surely one of the most secure in the world. Why did the police evict Kim's bodyguards from his house?

A more likely explanation is that the hardliners within the government simply bristled at the thought of Kim's return being governed by an agreement with the United States, and virtually dictated by the delegation of human-rights activists accompanying Kim. Raw nationalism came to the surface. They moved in to take complete control over the event, and left the Foreign Ministry and the government information office to cover for them. (As one information official said outside Kim's house on the afternoon of his arrival, "They do these things and we have to pick up the pieces.")

The government's baser instincts showed through when it felt threatened. As one diplomat put it, "A lot of hardliners in the government said to hell with foreign relations, to hell with the Foreign Ministry."

There are plenty of Koreans in important places in the government whose idea of democracy and legal due process are fairly Western. But in a crunch, they are not the people with ultimate authority in Korea. When the government feels threatened, as it clearly did by the return of Kim Dae-jung, it is the "hardliners" who come out on top.

Since Kim's return, the government has taken several important steps to open up Korea's domestic political process. These steps have vastly improved the government's international image. None of them, however, has in any way compromised the government's grip on power.

What everyone in Korea wants to know is how the government will respond when the political opposition musters its forces, comes knocking at the government's door, and asks for a share of power. That will clearly happen before too long (read my next report!).

It is not inevitable that hardliners in the government will prevail in the next political crisis. But the government's behavior during the return of Kim Dae-jung does not bode well. The Kim Dae-jung affair did not just raise questions about who is really in charge in Korea. It answered them.

Best,

Steven B. Butler

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