

## **August 31, 1976**

# **Report on the 'Axe Murder Incident' from the GDR Embassy in North Korea**

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### **Summary:**

Report on the killing of two American officers in the Joint Security Area. Ambassador Steinhofer states that this incident is a testimony of the tense situation that exists between the two sides and he provides an analysis of what the implications of this incident are.

### **Credits:**

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German

### **Contents:**

Translation - English

GDR Embassy to the DPRK  
Pyongyang, 31 August 1976

Ministry for Foreign Affairs  
Acting Head of Far Eastern Department  
Comrade Rolf Berthold  
Berlin

Dear Comrade Berthold!

Please allow me, in addition to our wired information, to share some more reflections on recent developments in Korea.

The reason behind the scuffle between guards from the American-South Korean and the North Korean side on 18 August 1976 was a petty one (North Korean version: attempt to cut down a tree in the Joint Security Area; version of the adversary: trimming a tree). It lays bare the senselessness behind the killing of two American officers from the border unit well known to the North Korean guards.

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To our knowledge, incidents with similar outcomes occurred in recent years only in 1967 when twelve American soldiers were killed, and in 1975 when one U.S. officer was severely injured.

We think it is highly speculative to assert that one side had planned this incident. An analysis of overall developments since August 18, in particular the DPRK response to the statement by the Supreme Commander of the United Nations Forces in South Korea, shows at least that the death of two officers was not part of any calculation. It was an "over-reaction" by the DPRK personnel involved in the incident, whose background probably lies in fanatical feelings of hate.

The swift and strong reactions from both sides testify to the indeed permanently tense situation on the Korean peninsula. At any time, a sudden escalation can occur which might indeed result in a serious threat to peace. Tensions already exist as a result of the large number of troops and arms on a comparatively small territory, and a permanent ideological pressure on people on both sides to stay alert for armed conflict in order to bring about unification.

The lack of military reaction by the DPRK to the entrance of a large number of fully armed American soldiers into the Joint Security Area, and the felling of the disputed tree under military protection on August 21, was surprising. There is no doubt that this was a serious violation of the armistice and its subsequent agreements. Perhaps the DPRK was taken by surprise. However, since then the troops were alerted to combat readiness on August 19 already, respective countermeasures could certainly have been undertaken. Thus, the only conclusion left to be drawn is that the DPRK, indeed, did not desire any further aggravation, which might have caused a hardly controllable escalation. During discussions, Korean comrades also emphasized that the DPRK did not want to let itself be provoked. In addition, the determination displayed by the U.S. through its spectacular military presence and the combat readiness of its troops made any prospects for a quick [North Korean] military success quite remote.

It is remarkable that the DPRK has, so far, not published the message by the Supreme Commander of U.N. Forces in South Korea to the Supreme Commander of the Korean

People's Army (Kim Il Sung) and the latter's response. Even the DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister, Comrade Han Shi Hae, was willing to concede on August 25, and only after repeated pressure from representatives of socialist states convened to a briefing, that [Kim Il Sung's] response called the incident as "regrettable". Though the DPRK comrades are energetically refuting it, this still represents a certain concession they want to keep secret from their people for matters of prestige.

Obviously, the U.S. and South Korea on one side and the DPRK on the other side tried, and are still trying, to exploit the incident for their political objectives.

As far as we can see from here, it must have been a welcome opportunity for [U.S. President Gerald] Ford to demonstrate leadership and determination in his [Republican primary] campaign against [Ronald] Reagan. It also represented a convenient chance to improve the U.S. image, and to demonstrate loyalty and credibility towards American allies in Asia in light of the U.S. debacle in Indochina and the political defeat in Angola. It remains to be seen how the conflict in Korea will reflect on, [Democratic presidential candidate], Jimmy Carter's positions. As it is well known, he has promised to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea over the coming years. The DPRK is obviously interested in fomenting the slogan "not our boys" in the United States. However, recent developments might also embolden those in the U.S. who advocate a continuing American presence in Korea to sustain the armistice. Certainly the ruling circles in the United States will exploit the existing situation to move along with a program of modernization of the South Korean army.

According to South Korean sources, South Korea advocates a position of strength, sparks off a new large-scale anti-communist campaign among the South Korean population, and again attempts to legitimize its dictatorial system through the "threat from the North". Currently, criticism of the domestic situation in South Korea is markedly on the rise internationally, for instance in the United States. It also gets combined with demands to cut down economic and military aid to South Korea. Apparently, the current tensions are very convenient to [South Korean President] Park Chung Hee. He swiftly used the opportunity to denounce opposition forces, for instance the former presidential candidate Kim Daejung and former President Yun Bo-seon.

Based on recent developments, the DPRK is eager to bolster its theory from its 5 August 1976 government declaration according to which the U.S. and South Korea have finalized their war preparations and moved on towards actually launching a war. The DPRK wants to prove that the threat to peace in Korea, and thus also in the entire world, emanates from the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea. At the same time, the incident will reaffirm the DPRK's negative opinion on [Soviet-American] détente and support the [North Korean] demand to negotiate and solve current problems in direct talks with the United States.

At the 380th meeting of the armistice commission, the DPRK proposed, to divide the Joint Security Area along the course of the demarcation line. It is supposed to demonstrate before the world, the DPRK's peaceful intentions and its willingness towards constructive solutions. It was worth noting that DPRK propaganda, presumably out of foreign policy considerations, did not link the determination to smash the enemy in the case of aggression to the previously common phrase about the achievement of unification.

In retrospect, the incident justified Kim Il Sung's non-attendance at the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Colombo.

It is clearly evident by now that the DPRK leadership seizes on the current situation to further solidify the people's unity on the basis of "juche" ideology and increases the economic norms for the workers. These efforts are strongly reflected by the mass

media.

We think that the conflict had no influence on the agreements in Colombo. However, it will have major impact for both the American-South Korean and the DPRK side concerning preparations for the 31st U.N. General Assembly. Both sides will attempt to use the conflict in their arguments for their respective different resolution drafts.

We do not have much to say on positions held by the People's Republic of China in the current situation. There was only a note in the DPRK press that [the Chinese news agency] "Xinhua" has published, without a commentary of its own, excerpts from the North Korean statement of August 19, as well as the content of the order by the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army about the alert of combat readiness. Like the major Western news agencies, South Korean sources report extensive contacts in Washington between the U.S. State Department and the Chinese Liaison Office. The PR China is said to have followed up on the U.S. request to exert moderating influence on the DPRK, but also to have asked the U.S. to show restraint. Compared to the otherwise common habit of the Maoists support of the DPRK with strong rhetoric, China's current unusual restraint seems to validate this theory. This Chinese position would also reflect the result of Kim Il Sung's visit to China in 1975.

According to its official information, the DPRK also declined any requests to receive or send delegations to a couple of socialist countries in recent days. Strangely, the cancellations already extend well into December. Also, the "Second Meeting of the Youth of the Third World" in Pyongyang has been postponed for now. A somewhat illogical exception is the travel by a party delegation vacation to the GDR, the first of such kind after many years. The Deputy Head of the KWP Central Committee Department for Workers and Peasants Militia is part of the delegation. Otherwise, with the de facto cessation of any other delegation activity, the DPRK wants to convey to foreign countries the tenseness of the current situation. We can already conclude, at this point, that all this will result in partial limitation of relations with other socialist states and developing countries for a certain period of time. It is also expected that the DPRK will rationalize its current inability to meet its export requirements in bilateral trade and to reduce its growing financial debts by pointing to the aggravated situation, the need for further increase of defense capabilities, and by demanding even more foreign aid.

In general, we currently have the impression that the situation has somewhat calmed down and tensions are decreasing. In short sequence, the 380th, 381st, and 382nd meeting of the armistice commission were held. Given the tense situation, they took place in a comparatively sober atmosphere. The U.S. accepted the DPRK proposal to discuss a division of the Joint Security Area. It was agreed at the 381st meeting to forward this proposal to the secretaries of the commission for further consideration. The U.S. softened its initial negative reaction to the DPRK response to the American message. Though, the United States still demands security guarantees for its personnel in Panmunjom and punishment of those directly responsible for the killing of the two U.S. officers.

The DPRK has also become more restrained in its statements. The danger of war has already changed its status as the only dominant issue in [North Korean] mass media. According to our information, a cancellation of combat readiness for armed forces in both South Korea and the DPRK is to be expected. However, it would be wrong to completely exclude the possibility of another drastic aggravation, particularly as long as the troops are still in a status of combat readiness.

Official information by DPRK organs to the embassies of socialist fraternal countries is unsatisfactory and inappropriate to the situation. Not earlier than August 25 the

ambassadors and acting ambassadors were called to the DPRK Foreign Ministry on short notice where they were officially, and in detail, informed about the August 18 incident. There were no references to other relevant aspects of the overall situation or intentions of the DPRK. Some ambassadors expressed, in polite fashion, their dissatisfaction to the DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister, Comrade Han Shi Hae.

Our collective embassy was always informed, in close cooperation with the party secretary and in a timely manner, about the development of the situation. We referred to the seriousness of the situation without hiding our conviction that an outbreak of war is, currently, very unlikely. All the employees acted calmly and with discipline. Also, the pre-announced air raid warning (the embassies were told to dim the daylight) went along smoothly for the embassy. We initiated those measures we considered appropriate in the interest of security.

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The condition of our air raid shelter in the basement is still unsatisfactory. Despite certain construction measures, it still floods during the rainy period. Thus, we have to apply additional measures.

Concerning your telegram of August 23, which apparently crossed with our information from the same day, I am happy to assure you that the core statements of our information were, of course, coordinated with comrades from the Soviet embassy and other fraternal embassies.

With socialist greetings,

[signed] Steinhofner

Acting Ambassador