

February 28, 1977

**US National Security Council Memorandum,
'Contacts and Communications with North Korea'**

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Summary:

Mike Armacost weighs in on North Korea's policy toward the United States, and whether Cyrus Vance ought to reply to a letter from North Korean Foreign Minister Heo Dam.

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NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

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February 28, 1977

MEMORANDUM FOR: ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI
FROM: MIKE ARMACOST
SUBJECT: Contacts and Communications with
North Korea

On our Evening Report of February 17, you raised a question as to why you or Secretary Vance should not receive a letter from North Korean Foreign Minister Ho Tam carried by a friend of Jerry Cohen's. I have two answers -- one short; one longer. The first is mainly procedural; the other is more substantive.

(1) The short answer is that this is an unlikely channel for serious communications. For the last few years North Korea has made a variety of efforts to get in touch with U.S. officials. In the process they have discovered that a number of governments are quite eager to extend their good offices in promoting a dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang -- most notably Pakistan, Egypt, and Romania. Thus there is no dearth of plausible channels. At the same time there are lots of people like this friend of Cohen's who are eager to get in on the action. Why offer them encouragement? This is not to say that we should refuse to receive a letter. On the contrary, Cohen was told that if his friend (Neumoff) wanted to deliver a message, he should pass it to Bill Gleysteen at State. To date no letter has come. I will report to you on its contents if and when one does.

(2) But there are more serious reasons why we need, in my view, to exercise some caution in the way we respond to North Korean desires to establish bilateral contacts with us at this time. The case is built on these propositions:

-- While North Korea has never renounced its objective of reunifying the Korean peninsula on its own terms, it has been reasonably flexible with respect to its strategy for achieving its aim. For example, in the late 1960's it pursued without notable success a confrontationist approach. Subsequently, it tried a "detente" strategy culminating in the abortive

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North-South talks of 1972. Thereafter it turned to a more adroit diplomatic offensive designed to: (a) enhance North Korea's international standing while putting the South on the defensive diplomatically and casting ^{it} in the role of a pariah; (b) diversify its trading links in order to accelerate industrial development, expand commercial entree to the West, and diminish dependence on Moscow and Peking; (c) obtain preferred access to the nonaligned movement and use it to alter the international climate of opinion on the Korean issue; (d) increase South Korea's sense of political isolation by alienating it from its principal allies; and (e) generate growing international and domestic pressures in the U.S. for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the peninsula.

-- In 1973-75 this diplomatic strategy netted Pyongyang notable results. The North was recognized by a large number of states, and now enjoys diplomatic relations with nearly as many countries as Seoul. The DPRK was admitted to the nonaligned movement; the South was not. A pro-North Korean resolution was passed in the UNGA for the first time in 1975. The North established commercial links with Western Europe and Japan. They outpaced the South in the development of an indigenous defense industry. The North's hopes for U.S. troop withdrawals were buoyed by growing Congressional criticism of President Park. Kim Il-sung floated many proposals for direct contacts with the U.S.; he refused to talk with the South so long as Park remained in power. He enjoyed the diplomatic momentum. He seemed persuaded time was on his side.

-- In 1976 North Korea fell on hard times. Growing debt problems compromised efforts to accelerate industrialization and expand commercial ties with western countries, while forcing the DPRK back toward greater dependence on Peking and Moscow -- neither of which has been very generous in furnishing hard currency loans. Scandals involving North Korean smuggling activities in Scandinavia impaired North Korea's international reputation. Ham-handed North Korean diplomacy at the Colombo Non-aligned Conference alarmed many moderate LDCs. Pyongyang was forced to withdraw its resolution from the UNGA when it realized that support for its position was declining. The DMZ incident on August 17 provoked a more immediate and forceful U.S. reaction than the North presumably expected; and Japan supported U.S. moves without the usual skittishness and hesitancy. There were also signs of political turmoil in Pyongyang.

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-- These developments must have been all the more discouraging to the North in view of South Korea's phenomenal economic performance (15 percent real growth in GNP in 1976 and exports exceeding \$8 billion) and relative political tranquility. If the North enjoyed broader recognition, moreover, Pyongyang found that few states were willing to give up ties with Seoul in order to preserve links with them. Thus an increasing number of states (now 48) recognize both, thus lending increased legitimacy to the reality of two Koreas. And Seoul's relative advantages in most measurable elements of national power continued to grow. Meanwhile, U.S. forces remained on the peninsula, and the U.S. refused to be drawn into direct discussions of Korean problems with Pyongyang without participation by ROK representatives.

-- These developments should force North Korean leaders to reexamine the premises underlying their current strategy -- including their refusal to deal with President Park's regime. But the DPRK, like most other governments, probably finds it distasteful to face up to unpleasant realities. It may therefore be expected to postpone hard choices as long as possible. At present Kim will certainly probe with special care the Korean policies of new governments in the United States and Japan while testing the support of Moscow and Peking.

-- The U.S. is the key to North Korea's strategy. President Carter's troop withdrawal plans have evinced a cautious optimism from the North. Kim has indirectly relayed (via the Pakistanis) his intent to avoid confrontation with the U.S. and to pursue reunification peacefully, but he has also sought to open direct peace talks with us which (at least initially) would exclude representatives of the South. We need not play their game on this. Promotion of our interests in Korea requires resumption of a serious North-South dialogue. That can come only when Kim recognizes that he cannot hope to resolve Korean issues behind Seoul's back.

-- I believe our best bet for now is, therefore, to welcome any signs of North Korean moderation, and to affirm regularly our willingness to discuss with them matters bearing on Korea's future provided representatives of the ROKG are present. It is particularly important that we maintain this stance during a time when we are contemplating major troop withdrawals from the South.

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