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TO PRIORITY FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 243 OF 18 AUGUST

INFO TOKYO, WASHINGTON, AND MODUK (D14)

Prime Minister

MS/MAP 24/8

RESIGNATION OF PRESIDENT CHOI

1. IN OUR RECENT REPORTS WE HAVE NOTED THAT GENERAL CHUN'S PRESIDENTIAL AMBITIONS HAVE BECOME MUCH MORE OBVIOUS. PRESIDENTS CHOI'S RESIGNATION NOW CLEARS THE WAY FOR CHUN'S ELECTION AS PRESIDENT BY THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR UNIFICATION (NCU). THIS COULD WELL TAKE PLACE BY THE END OF AUGUST. IT SEEMS MOST UNLIKELY THAT ANY OTHER CANDIDATE WILL BE CONSIDERED SERIOUSLY.

2. THE REASON FOR THIS SUDDEN ACCELERATION IN THE QUOTE PROCESS OF CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE UNQUOTE IS NOT CLEAR. THERE SEEMED TO BE NO REASON TO CHANGE PRESIDENTS BEFORE THE NEW CONSTITUTION IS READY. EVEN THE AMERICANS WERE TAKEN BY SURPRISE. THEY AND THE JAPANESE WERE ONLY INFORMED LATE ON FRIDAY THAT CHOI WOULD RESIGN THE FOLLOWING MORNING. THE OFFICIAL EXPLANATION FOR THE TIMING (PARA. 6 OF MY TUR) IS UNLIKELY TO BEE THE WHOLE STORY. IT SEEMS PROBABLE THAT CHUN DECIDED THAT HE WOULD BE BETTER PLACED TO CONTROL EVENTS, INCLUDING ARRANGEMENTS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE, IF HE TOOK OVER THE PRESIDENCY, AND THAT HE CHOSE A PERIOD WHEN ALL WAS CALM INTERNALLY AND WHEN HE HAD GAINED A MEASURE OF POPULAR SUPPORT FROM THE SOCIAL REFORMS INSTIGATED BY THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY MEASURES. ALL THE EVIDENCE WE HAVE SUGGESTS THAT CHUN'S DECISION WAS NOT LONG PREMEDITATED. THE ABSENCE OF AMBASSADOR GLEYSTEN AND GENERAL WICKHAM MAY ALSO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO IT.

3. BUSINESS CIRCLES ARE LIKELY TO ACCEPT THE ELECTION OF GENERAL CHUN WITH RESIGNED RELIEF AS THEY ARE ANXIOUS TO SEE THE DECISION-TAKING PROCESS IN ACTION AGAIN. POLITICIANS, ACADEMICS AND STUDENTS WILL BE GREATLY DISILLUSIONED, BUT FOR THE MOMENT ARE IN CONSIDERABLE DISARRAY WITH NO OBVIOUS FIGURES OR ASSOCIATIONS AROUND WHICH TO RALLY. THE POLITICAL PARTIES ARE WEAK AND DISORGANISED, WHILE THE STUDENTS ARE STILL AT HOME. IT IS TRUE THAT THE UNIVERSITIES WILL OPEN SOON: SOME FACULTIES ARE ALREADY WORKING. BUT ALL STUDENTS ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN LEADING THE MAY DEMONSTRATIONS HAVE BEEN EXPELLED AND IT IS CLEAR THAT THE MILITARY WILL ACT FIRMLY AGAINST ANY NEW SIGNS OF UNREST. THE PRESS, TOO, IS POWERLESS: IT IS STRICTLY CENSORED AND CARRIES NO NEWS UNFAVOURABLE TO THE GOVERNMENT. CHUN WILL THEREFORE BE ABLE TO ATTAIN THE PRESIDENCY WITHOUT DIFFICULTY BUT HE WILL NOT HAVE THE WHOLEHEARTED SUPPORT OF THE POPULATION.

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4. THE ARMED FORCES AND HOMELAND RESERVE FORCES WERE PLACED ON SPECIAL ALERT EARLY ON SATURDAY MORNING. THE DEFENCE MINISTER SAID THIS ACTION WAS TO COUNTER QUOTE UNUSUAL NORTH KOREAN MILITARY MOVES UNQUOTE. U.S. FORCES HAVE NOT BEEN ALERTED..
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THIS TELEGRAM
WAS NOT
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RELATIONS BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA AND
THE EVENTS IN THE SOUTHSummary

North Korea has eschewed military moves in response to the political disruption in the South and has concentrated instead on propaganda and subversion. Neither the Soviet Union nor China would be interested in supporting a military move by North Korea at present.

1. The assassination of President Park and the resulting crumbling of political cohesion in the Republic of Korea (ROK) no doubt suited the North Koreans well but they have moved cautiously in their attempts to capitalise on events. Immediately after the assassination in October 1979, the United States placed American forces in the ROK on alert, reinforced aerial surveillance and positioned a carrier task force near Cheju Island. The State Department issued a statement warning that it would react strongly in accordance with its treaty obligations to any external attempt to exploit the situation in the ROK. Neither of North Korea's two major allies, China and the USSR, gave any hint of willingness to back a forceful North Korean policy in the South. The Chinese were clearly more interested in pursuing their current rapprochement with the US and Japan. Chairman Hua Guofeng, at his press conference in Tokyo on 29 May spoke of his "reliable information" that the North did not intend to intervene in the turmoil in the South. The Russians, whose relations with North Korea are no longer what they once were, had no wish to get involved in a situation which could have led to confrontation with the US.
2. How seriously the military option was considered by the North Koreans is not known. It appears that no military measures were put in hand. Propaganda beamed at the South was however stepped up and the North Koreans tried to exploit events to advance their policy of peaceful reunification. The Party newspaper, Nodong Shinmun, published an editorial on 9 November offering to resume negotiations with President Park's successors, and suggesting the possibility of economic and other cooperation. Then around the turn of the year came three North Korean proposals: a joint Olympic team, resumed contact on the direct Pyongyang-Seoul telephone link and talks between the two sides to prepare the comprehensive conference of all political parties and social organisations which the North Koreans have long hoped to secure. Even when the crisis in the ROK intensified in May 1980, the North Koreans reiterated that they had no intention of using force and on the contrary were seeking a dialogue.
3. The response of the South was cautious: the Prime Minister suggested working-level meetings to prepare for a meeting between the two Prime Ministers. A series of meetings began in February but, after some initial progress, became stuck on the question of

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the agenda. The Northern side proposed one vague and comprehensive item; the South insisted on a more concrete list.

4. Meanwhile the political situation in the South continued to deteriorate. It seems likely that the North Koreans will continue to rule out the direct military option at least as long as US forces remain committed to the South and the ROK armed forces remain under discipline and on guard. The likelihood of continued North Korean attempts to infiltrate agents to foment subversion was however demonstrated by an incident on 21 June when a spy ship was sunk by the ROK coastguard. The North Koreans will no doubt continue to encourage further deterioration in political conditions in the South.

5. The North Koreans may also hope that their "peaceful" strategy will promote their influence in the Non-Aligned Movement. They have already presented a report on conditions in the South to a meeting of the Non-Aligned Ambassadors at UN Headquarters on 19 June. They could well have been testing the wind for an attempt to resubmit the Korean Question to the United Nations itself, but would have received little encouragement from that meeting.

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