

CHAPTER 5

The Park Assassination and Its Aftermath

I returned to Seoul and the U.S. Embassy as soon as possible, arriving early on the afternoon of October 27, 1979, and went directly to my office. Col. Don Blottie was there and had attended several meetings that morning with the senior embassy staff. He told me that our staff had been shocked and concerned and was still putting together all the details and known facts concerning the assassination. He said that Pres. Park Chung Hee had been killed by the South Korean CIA director, Kim Jae Kyu, and that the internal situation was as calm as could be expected under the circumstances. The purpose of the several meetings at the embassy and the military headquarters at Yongsan was to assess the situation, particularly as it concerned North Korea. The primary concern was clearly to ensure that the North not take advantage of the situation. There also had been some concern about a coup attempt by the military in view of the power vacuum created by Park's death, but those fears had apparently evaporated.

Even though most people had speculated as to what might happen if President Park should die suddenly or decide to step down, the embassy and the U.S. government were completely unprepared for the actual event. Unlike the Korean government, which had prepared contingency plans and immediately declared martial law, the Americans had no idea how to proceed. After consultations with Washington and the local meetings, the State Department decided to issue a statement: "The United States Government wishes to make it clear that it will react strongly in accordance with its treaty obligations to the Republic of Korea to any external attempt to exploit the situation in the Republic of Korea."¹ The military thought that more concrete steps should be taken, a view supported by the Defense Department. This resulted in the deployment of a naval task force, increasing the readiness posture of our forces in Korea and some air force units in the region, and deploying Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft to the area in order to better monitor North Korean military activities.

In the days and even years that followed, some Koreans believed that either the U.S. government, or the American CIA, had some role in the assassination of President Park. I have never, in all my time spent in the Korean intelligence business, found even the most remote evidence of this. It is true that Park was not very popular in Washington, especially after Carter became president. Nonetheless, involvement in Park's assassination by the Carter administration would have been completely out of character. In fact, at the time of Park's death, the Carter administration was taking strong and decisive actions to reduce the CIA's capabilities, especially in the clandestine operations area. Also, CIA involvement in assassinations was at the time (and still is) prohibited by U.S. law. The political climate in Washington in 1979 was such that it would have been impossible to conduct such an operation in secret.²

A few days after the assassination, I personally reviewed most of the intelligence reporting and cable messages in the days leading up to Park's death and could find no evidence that would lead a reasonable person to conclude that he was in any physical danger. There were, however, some indications that moderates in the Korean government felt Park was taking too firm a posture regarding student and labor demonstrations. There was also some reporting that indicated frustration because access to the president was so tightly controlled, especially by his universally disliked chief of staff, Cha Chi Chol, who was assassinated as well. In retrospect, I believe that Cha's heavy-handed and arrogant behavior was at least partially responsible for President Park's assassination. But I am totally convinced that the United States neither had a role in it nor had any reason to suspect foul play in advance.

In the days that followed, U.S. government policy toward Korea focused on two major objectives. The first was ensuring that the North Koreans would not try to take advantage of the situation. This was accomplished by increasing our surveillance of the North, particularly their communications transmissions, and by conducting frequent satellite observation of their military forces. After a few days it was evident that the North was taking no unusual actions, but we continued to closely monitor the situation.

The second objective was to encourage political reform. Some State Department officers in Washington believed that the death of Park could open the way for progress on democracy, human rights, and the overall political reforms that were of such importance to the administration. Carter selected Secretary of State Vance as his personal representative at Park's funeral, and Vance indicated the importance of political reform during a press conference

in Washington prior to his departure for Seoul: “We hope that political growth in the Republic of Korea will be commensurate with economic and social progress.”³ He later discussed the importance that the administration placed on these issues with Pres. Choi Kyu Ha, Park’s successor, urging the release of certain political prisoners and efforts to form a truly representative and democratic government in South Korea such as direct election of the president and a revised constitution.⁴

While Vance’s remarks were well meaning, it was obvious to even the most unsophisticated observer that the focus of power in South Korea remained with the military. Yet the State Department and the U.S. Embassy felt they had no real choice but to deal with the legal government of President Choi, who, although first in the line of succession to Park under the Yushin Constitution, was a career bureaucrat with weak credentials for top leadership. U.S. diplomats ignored the opportunity to expand direct contacts with the ROK military, seeking instead to use every opportunity to convince the Choi government to make sweeping changes even though it had no real power to do so. Some of us believed that a better choice would have been to accept the power situation as it really existed by opening up a more direct channel. It was clear that under martial law Choi was only a figurehead. Even after martial law was lifted, the military would still hold the ultimate political power. Yet the State Department continued to play the charade that it was making progress on the political reform issue through the “legitimate authorities.”

Chung Sung Hwa

During the period immediately following Park’s death, ROK Army chief of staff Gen. Chung Sung Hwa was involved in great controversy because of his presence at a dinner party on the same compound and near the location where the president was assassinated. As the facts emerged, however, his role appeared to be one of innocence in the assassination plot, more a victim of circumstance. Under the declaration of martial law, he was the commander, with significant authority that went well beyond his normal military duties.

The U.S. military-intelligence community’s appraisal of General Chung was quite favorable. He had a reputation as a competent officer and was considered to be more sophisticated, polished, and open to fresh ideas than most of his contemporaries. Chung had been somewhat of a surprise choice as army chief of staff since he had been the First ROK Army commander,

usually considered less prestigious than some other four-star positions such as command of the Third ROK Army. He had a reputation as a thoughtful, well-read, nonpolitical, and conservative officer. Although his views of the internal Korean political situation were not well known, he appeared to be more moderate than most of his fellow generals.⁵ Considering his powerful position, I recommended to Bob Brewster that a direct channel be established with General Chung. In this way the embassy might be able to make its views known and have some success at having those views implemented during the transition, particularly concerning political reform. As it was, the constant urging of the embassy at the “official” levels achieved nothing other than polite listening.

Brewster agreed with my idea, and we began to make initial plans to implement it after coordination with the Political Section and the ambassador. We were both enthusiastic about the plan, which might have held out real hope for the advancement of democracy in South Korea and also avoided subsequent events, including the December 12 army coup of Maj. Gen. Chun Doo Hwan, the imposition of martial law in May, 1980, and the Kwangju incident.⁶ Unfortunately the plan was disapproved after objections by the Political Section, objections supported by the ambassador.

Why was this initiative never carried out? I think for three reasons. First, General Chung was personally involved in the events surrounding President Park’s death. There was concern that close cooperation and contact with him would fuel the speculation that the United States was somehow involved in the assassination. Rumors of U.S. involvement were sweeping Seoul at that time, and the Political Section did not want to make them any more credible than necessary. Second, our plan called for using the intelligence channel rather than the diplomatic channel. The State Department was likely concerned that it would lose control of what it viewed as an essentially political matter. Of course, the reality of the time was that political and military matters were almost one in the same, but this was a moot point. Third, some of the State Department’s foreign-service officers had an almost paranoid distrust of the military, and they feared U.S. association with martial law in the eyes of the Korean public. Few of them had ever served on active duty, and those who had were not fond of the experience. They believed that everyone in the ROK military thought the same way, that they were interested only in staying in power, and that they would never agree to liberalizing the political system. This was incorrect—some of the military men thought that way, but others did not. I believed that General Chung was a reasonable man with whom we could have strong dialogue

and direct, continuing contact. But it was not to be. A channel to the military moderates was never opened.

During this period between the 10/26 and 12/12 incidents (Park's assassination and Chun's military coup respectively—major events in Korea are frequently referred to by the numbers of their month and day), there were a lot of rumors flying around Seoul, and it was often difficult to separate truth from fiction. Consistently, however, we began to receive reports of dissatisfaction from some elements of the military about the role of General Chung in the Park assassination. Since Chung was the army chief of staff and martial-law commander, it was very difficult to conduct an in-depth investigation of his actions. His explanations had seemed satisfactory to most of us, and his actions following the assassination, including the arrest of ROK CIA Chief Kim Jae Kyu, seemed proper and appropriate. Nonetheless, there were some signs that Chun Doo Hwan, who was by this time head of the Defense Security Command (DSC) and thus had the authority under martial law to investigate such matters, was coming under pressure to investigate more closely the general's role in the murder.

In addition to these reports, there were indications that Chung was aware of the possibility that he might be under some continued scrutiny by the DSC. In those days the DSC was greatly feared and had agents in every military unit. While their official purpose was to ensure adequate "security," these operatives were in reality political watchdogs whose agency was independent of the normal military chain of command. The DSC commander was traditionally chosen by the president himself, and Park had used the agency as his eyes and ears to watch the military and prevent any coup attempts. Under martial law as it existed in November and early December, 1979, the DSC was even more powerful.

I believe that General Chung was aware that General Chun might move against him. He appeared to take extra security precautions at times, and these were explained away by his aides because of martial law and Chung's need for extra protection as commander. In retrospect, however, he needed more security than he had.

In late November or early December, we began to receive reports that there would be some reassignments within the army. December was usually the time when routine military reassignments were announced, but this year we had expected normal reassignments to be delayed because of the uncertain situation. One rumor was that Chung intended to reassign Chun Doo Hwan from Seoul to the East Coast Security Command headquartered near Sokcho. If true, it would be perceived as removing Chun from the scene

because of his powerful and dangerous (to Chung) position as DSC commander. Regardless, the reassignment would mean the effective end of Chun's career in the army. But if U.S. military intelligence knew that Chun might be transferred, Chun himself would also know it; after all, he had many DSC field agents reporting to him, especially from within army headquarters.

About the same time, our Political Section received a cable from the State Department. According to the message, a Japanese diplomat in Washington had been discussing the Korean situation with his American counterpart, and the Japanese Foreign Ministry was of the opinion that Chun Doo Hwan was the most important and powerful figure in South Korea because of his authority to investigate others as DSC commander under martial law. The underlying tone of this message was simple: "be careful of Chun!"

One of the junior officers from the Political Section had brought this message down to see if the Defense Attaché Office had any information on Chun. After I finished laughing, I gave the officer a briefing on what we already knew. After he left I began to wonder whether the left hand knew what the right hand was doing—obviously we were in big trouble if Washington had such a superficial understanding of the situation that it did not know who Chun was, especially after all the reporting we had done. The problem was that, while the DIA and CIA obviously had large amounts of information, the State Department, at least at the working levels, was only peripherally aware of this important personality. Soon they would recognize his name quite well.

Other Indications of Developing Trouble

To this point, I have focused primarily on the activities within the U.S. Embassy and in Washington. There was also significant information available within the U.S. military headquarters at Yongsan. The Combined Forces Command (CFC) was a binational (Korean and American) organization with the straightforward mission of deterring attack by external forces and, if deterrence failed, to defend the ROK. Unlike the embassy, which had a political and reporting mission, CFC was focused entirely on its military mission. U.S. Forces Korea, however, was a unilateral, U.S.-only headquarters, and within that organization were military-intelligence units. Some of these worked closely in a liaison role with various ROK intelligence agencies. These sources also were picking up the same information that we had reported. Specifically they were aware that there was speculation that General Chun

might be reassigned to the East Coast Security Command and that he was under pressure to interrogate Chung Sung Wha concerning his role in the 10/26 incident. This information was forwarded through army channels and was routinely available throughout the Washington intelligence community, including the DIA, CIA, and State Department. The embassy also received these reports, but I am not aware that there was ever any concern shown or action taken as a result. Gen. John Wickham, who had recently replaced General Vessey as the senior American military commander in Korea, was personally aware of these reports and of growing unrest among the four-year Korean Military Academy group led by Chun, and I suspect that Ambassador Gleysteen was aware of them as well.⁷ In fact, several years later it was officially revealed that General Wickham had actually discussed these reports with his deputy CFC commander, Gen. Lew Byong Hyun, and other senior ROK defense officials, including Defense Minister Rho Jae Hyun, but that the consensus was that these reports were not credible.⁸

At this time I was meeting regularly with the Japanese attaché. He was hearing the same stories as the USFK intelligence units and myself and was of the opinion that South Korea was approaching a crisis period. He was convinced that Chun was in a very strong position and, if ordered to leave his Seoul DSC posting for the east coast, would refuse. Throughout this period, I was of the opinion that the Japanese knew more than they were telling, that they had excellent information on the situation, possibly better than we had.

Looking back on all of this, it is difficult to believe that we missed anticipating the 12/12 incident, or at least something similar to it. I am still not sure why, but one possible explanation is that the embassy staff was concentrating on other issues and considered these reports as military matters, while the military was focused on watching North Korea. USFK as an institution also had a natural dislike for investigating such reports in any depth because they were considered internal ROK Army matters. General Wickham likely believed that he had done his duty by bringing the reports to the attention of his Korean counterparts, especially Minister Rho and General Lew. When they showed no concern he was satisfied.⁹

In fact, had General Wickham been in his job longer and had time to develop a better feel for the Korean military, he would have known that Minister Rho was held in almost universal disdain, especially by those from Class 11 and later classes of the KMA. He was less well trained and less intelligent in their view—a perfect example of the “old school military.” Their nickname for him (behind his back, obviously) was “Sergeant” Rho. He was

a prime target for removal. As for General Lew, most serious Korea watchers believed the deputy CFC was generally chosen for his English-language skills and ability to get along well with the Americans rather than for any special capability or competence. Interestingly Lew later became a spokesman and apologist for Chun Doo Hwan. He was promoted to chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff and later to the post of South Korean ambassador to the United States under the Chun regime. Had Wickham taken his information directly to General Chung, or had Brewster done so, the army chief of staff might not have been caught by surprise on December 12.

In the days leading up to the 12/12 incident, despite the tension in the air, the diplomatic circuit continued to host the usual rounds of official parties and receptions. It was often difficult to find a free night, one when some official function was not scheduled. I had recently been promoted to lieutenant colonel and was expected to host a promotion party to celebrate the occasion. After checking all available dates, we decided that the best one, when our Korean military friends would not be engaged, would be December 12, 1979. As it turned out, of course, they were actually very engaged that night.