

Revisiting the 1983 Rangoon Bombing

Covert Action in North Korea's Foreign Relations

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The assassination attempt on South Korean (ROK) President Chun Doo Hwan during a state visit to Rangoon, Burma (now known as Yangon, Myanmar) in 1983 illustrates the willingness of the North Korean state to engage in state terror not only against its own citizens, but also against the ROK. The authors examine the North Korean state's adoption of covert operations tactics and terrorist activity in an attempt to undermine the ROK, even when its actions have costs in terms of the North's relationship with individual Southeast Asian states. In addition, using newly-released archival material from the British National Archives, the authors examine the 1983 Rangoon Bombing as a case study in North Korean covert operations abroad.

Key Words: Rangoon bombing, Chun Doo Hwan

I. Introduction

Although contemporary interest is heavily focussed on the international implications of North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, this should not overshadow other provocative aspects of Pyongyang's behaviour in international relations. In this regard, North Korea's track record of overseas covert activities warrants continued study. Whilst Pyongyang has undertaken multiple overseas covert activities over the preceding decades, the 1983 assassination attempt on South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan during a state visit to Rangoon, Burma, is of particular interest, given the brazen nature of the North Korean attempt to assassinate a Republic of Korea (ROK) Head of State

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on the soil of a country with hitherto friendly ties with Pyongyang.

In seeking to uncover Pyongyang's intentions behind the Rangoon bombing, accurate analysis was hampered by the lack of transparency of the North Korean, and until recently, Burmese state organs. This difficulty required the authors to combine source triangulation and reading in between the lines in attempting to discern Pyongyang's underlying motives in carrying out such a calculated attack on the ROK Government whilst on the territory of a neutral country with hitherto friendly relations with Pyongyang. Additional data for this manuscript was gleaned from Burmese sources and researchers specialising in Burma, along with recently-declassified archival material from the British Foreign Office and the United States (US) State Department. The authors have come to the conclusion that the assassination attempt on Chun was likely orchestrated by Kim Jong Il, son of North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, as part of the younger Kim's long-term plan to affirm and facilitate his succession to power. This analysis is outlined in the following sections, beginning with a discussion of the use of assassination as an instrument of terrorism in international relations. The next section proceeds to examine the backdrop within which the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) increasingly came to embrace covert operations in seeking to achieve its interests. This is followed by a section in which the authors examine the process of the Rangoon bombing itself. The manuscript then critically reviews four possible hypotheses that seek to explain North Korean intentions behind the Rangoon bombing, thence leading to the authors' conclusion that it had been intended by Kim Jong Il to affirm his martial credentials and thus suppress any possible challenge to his ambition to succeed his father as leader of North Korea.

II. Terrorism and Assassination as State Covert Operations

States have interfered in the internal affairs of other states through covert means for centuries. Covert action, frequently secret or at least designed so as to conceal its true origin, can cover a range of actions from financial support, disinformation and propaganda through to economic coercion, para-military actions and terrorism. Definitions of terrorism vary, although the most commonly agreed defining characteristics are that:

- i) it involves the use of violence, or the threat of violence;
- ii) it is driven by a political objective (be it a target country, a given ethnic or religious group, or a given ideological and social target);

- iii) it may be undertaken by military or espionage personnel from government organs, non-state organizations, or, increasingly in recent times, private citizens;
- iv) a terrorist action is aimed not only at the immediate victims of an attack, but also at society at large; such an effect, by emphasizing the psychological implications of the attack, is derived from the use of the attack to instill fear and terror in the targeted section of society (Meisels 2006, 465-83).

As examined elsewhere in the academic literature, the undertaking of terroristic activities in a bid to advance a political agenda is generally accepted as a flagrant violation of longstanding international norms of conduct (Wilkinson 1986). In so doing, the violation of such norms underscores their taboo nature. In this context, the sociological and anthropological literature emphasizes that taboos are a specific type of norm that prohibit certain actions, many of which are related to the notion of danger and the protection of society from the fall-out of dangerous or harmful acts or behavior (Romaniuk and Grice 2018). In addition, Gutierrez and Giner-Sorolla (2007, 853) argue that taboos can be defined as norms that, if violated, are 'expected to provoke inflexible, disgust-related responses'. In particular, Tannenwald emphasizes that the violation of a taboo is a far more flagrant breach of conduct than just a breaking of a given norm, on the grounds that the violation of a taboo reflects the perpetrator's willingness to undertake an action that is clearly proscribed by international public opinion. (Tannenwald 2007, 13)

Such is the case with political assassinations as a specific form of terrorism. When political assassinations are carried out as a specific instrument of terrorism, they may be defined as 'an action that directly or indirectly leads to the death of an intentionally targeted individual who is active in the political sphere, in order to promote or prevent specific policies, values, practices or norms' (Perliger 2015). Compared to other forms of political violence, the logic of assassinations implies that it is the character and status of the targeted individual that shapes the nature and objectives of the assassination. By illustration, in the Libyan bomb attack that destroyed PAN-AM Flight 103 over Scotland in 1988, the significance of the attack stemmed not from the persons who perished, their nationality or their status, but rather the status of PAN AM as a major US airline and symbolic target to signify Gadaffi's hostility towards the US Government (Malinarich 2001), and thus was not an act of assassination. In contrast, the destruction of Rwandan President Habyarimana's private jet in 1994 by Hutu military personnel drew its significance from his signing of the Arusha Peace Accords between the Rwandan Government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front. In so doing, the assassination of Habyarimana paved the way for Hutu militias to carry out the genocide against the Tutsi population

in the weeks that followed (Ferroggiaro, 2004). In this sense, the utilization of assassination of a high-profile figure as an instrument of terror can have multiple effects. Aside from striking a powerful symbolic blow against a political adversary, assassination can enable the perpetrator to demonstrate its ability to intimidate its opponent, demoralize mid-level policy technocrats in the target country, and undermine the international prestige of the target country (Snitch 1982, 54-68).

III. North Korea Embraces Covert Operations

From the time of their formal creation in 1948, the two Korean states were involved in an intense competition with each other for legitimacy, development and, above all, survival. Given that North Korea's attempted invasion of the South in 1950 was met by direct US military intervention, it was clear to Pyongyang that direct use of armed force on its southern rival was not a viable option. Instead, in the post-1953 environment, North Korea turned to various low-level border skirmishes against ROK and US forces near the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) and in the airspace and the waters around the Korean peninsula (Bolger 1991). Pyongyang's logic behind these activities was that, by undertaking armed skirmishes that fell below the threshold of a full-scale invasion of the South, it could minimize the risk of US counter-escalation on the grounds that such an action would be a disproportionate response. At the same time, by inflicting casualties on US and ROK military personnel on the DMZ, North Korea hoped that its guerrilla war on the DMZ would confront the US with the prospect of an unwinnable quagmire, and thus wear out US political will to sustain its military presence in the ROK. Given how the long-running Communist insurgency in Vietnam eroded the US public's will to support the South Vietnamese Government by the early 1970s, such calculations on the part of Pyongyang were not unrealistic.

In the inter-Korean context, the use of assassination as a form of terrorism had long been embraced by the North Korean leadership as a weapon against the ROK and US from the time of the 1953 Armistice Agreement. The most notable instances of North Korean state terrorism against the ROK prior to the Rangoon bomb attack took place in 1968 and 1974. In 1968, 31 North Korean commandoes infiltrated the DMZ in an attempt assassinate President Park Chung Hee, but were intercepted by local police. North Korea tried again in 1974, by recruiting a *Zainichi* (an ethnic Korean with a Japanese passport) residing in Osaka. Although the attempt failed to kill Park, stray bullets from the assassin killed ROK First Lady Yuk Young-Soo (Bolger 1991, 1-181).

What is notable about these 1960s and 1970s attacks on the ROK was that all of these actions were carried out on the Korean peninsula, and could therefore be proclaimed by the North as the continuation of the Korean War on the grounds that the Armistice Agreement was only a ceasefire agreement, and not a formal peace treaty. In contrast, the willingness of Pyongyang to stage such a flagrant attack on the ROK on the soil of a foreign nation in 1983 points to deep-seated calculations on the part of the North Korean leadership that the prospective benefits of such an action outweighed its corresponding risks.

IV. The 1983 Rangoon Bombing

Although North Korea developed diplomatic relations with most of the countries of the Southeast Asian region soon after their respective declarations of independence, it was Burma (officially renamed as Myanmar in 1989), which has had the most controversial relationship with North Korea. Convinced of the need to be non-aligned internationally, Burma became increasingly insular after a military-led coup in 1962 under Ne Win forged the 'Burmese Way to Socialism' (Aung-Thwin and Thant Myint-U 1992, 72-73). In foreign policy terms, this meant a strong sense of independence and carefully-controlled external contacts, following what David Steinberg referred to as 'a policy of studied neutralism' (Steinberg 1984, 195). However, the tenets of the 1950s of seeking good relations with all states but subservience to none were slowly modified in the 1960s into a more isolationist and xenophobic approach (Egretau and Jagan 2013). Burma's strong belief in independent sovereignty, its fervent anti-colonialism and its distrust of major power blocs in global politics, fitted it well for an important role in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which incorporated states that did not want to be allied or aligned with either of the two Cold War superpowers (Lintner 2013)¹. Under such circumstances, the political insularism and ideological outlooks of Burma and North Korea made them natural bedfellows (Kim 1987, 373).

However, as Burma slowly began to explore regional economic connections during the 1970s, South Korea became a particular object of interest. After two decades of non-committal caution, in May 1975, Burma had finally established diplomatic relations with both Koreas and by the early 1980s the ROK's growing economic standing had

¹ It should be noted that Burma withdrew from the NAM in 1979 because that organisation seemed to be leaning too close to the Eastern bloc.

led to increasing Burmese economic and commercial cooperation with Seoul (Liang 1990, 155-58). The growing self-confidence of the South Korea leaders on the world stage was reflected in the pragmatic economic diplomacy carried out under Chun Doo Hwan. Although he had seized power through a military coup, Chun saw foreign policy not only as a means to enhance his legitimacy, but also as a way to consolidate the economic achievements that South Korea had accomplished under himself and under Park Chung Hee. Moreover, Chun realised that the ROK's growing profile on the world stage also enabled Seoul to compete against Pyongyang in seeking allies in Southeast Asia, thereby enabling the ROK to isolate the North and thus coerce it into unification on Seoul's terms. Having made improving relations with South-East Asia a policy priority, he visited all five of the then-ASEAN member states in July 1981, and their leaders reciprocated by visiting Seoul (Gills 1996, 219). This encouraged Chun and his advisers to plan a second regional tour around six more nations in the Asia Pacific region during October 1983. Chun and his delegation of 22 ministers and officials arrived in Rangoon on October 8, 1983. The schedule called for Chun to lay a wreath at the Martyr's Mausoleum on the morning of Sunday, 9 October. Unknown to Chun's delegation and their Burmese hosts, on 17 September, three North Korean agents disguised as seamen had arrived in Rangoon port on a North Korean freighter (Bermundez 1990, 139-40).² Initially hiding in a safe house provided by a North Korean diplomat in Rangoon, the three agents approached the Mausoleum area on 7 October and planted remote-controlled bombs in the roof of the Mausoleum. They remained in the vicinity, planning to detonate the bombs upon the arrival of Chun's motorcade to ensure their 'kill'.

However, on Sunday 9 October Chun's visit to the Shwedagon Pagoda was delayed due to a scheduling clash arising from the ROK First Lady's meeting with her hosts in Rangoon, resulting in the ROK Ambassador's car being the first vehicle from Chun's delegation to reach the Martyr's Mausoleum (Selth 2012). The Burmese presidential bugler assumed that this was Chun's delegation and trumpeted his arrival. One of the North Korean agents, upon hearing the bugle call, assumed that Chun had arrived and triggered the explosion, killing eleven members of the ROK delegation, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and Chun's leading economic and foreign

2 This account of the assassination attempt draws on Bermundez 1990, Clifford 1994, Selth 2012, Ra 2013 and Iglauer 2014. The official Burmese report to the United Nations is reproduced in Yonhap News Agency, *Korea Annual*, 1985, 358-63. New details are derived from the files of the British Foreign Office, held at The National Archives, Kew, London [hereafter TNA], especially FCO15/3489 and FCO21/2516, as well as the recollections of Thomas 'Harry' Dunlop, political counsellor in the US Embassy in Seoul at the time (ADST 2017).

policy advisers. Chun himself was unharmed as his car was still several blocks away (Selth 2012).

Chun and his wife were immediately evacuated back to Seoul, where emergency Cabinet meetings were held in response (Pak 1983, 87; ADST 2017). In Rangoon, the Burmese authorities tracked down the three North Korean agents. In the resulting series of gunfights, one of the latter was killed (Memorandum by Alan Donald, November 7, 1983, TNA, FCO21/2516). Of the two surviving North Korean agents who were put on trial, one, Kim Jin-Su, was executed by the Burmese, and the last operative, Kang Min Chul, escaped the gallows by confessing to Pyongyang's culpability (TNA, FCO15/3489). Kang was to spend the rest of his life in a Burmese prison, never receiving a single visitor from North Korea, until his death from cancer in 2008 (Ra 2013; Iglauer 2014).

In a North Korean Foreign Ministry statement issued immediately after the Burmese rupture of relations, the Rangoon incident was described as being 'from outset a burlesque played on the script of traitor Chun Doo Hwan' (BBC 1983). The Burmese investigations and the trial, however, left no doubt that Pyongyang was responsible for the bombing (KOIS 1983; TNA, FCO21/2516). On 4 November the Burmese government denounced the 'saboteurs' and informed the North Koreans that diplomatic relations would be broken off. The North Korean Embassy in Rangoon was closed, and the 12 diplomatic staff and their dependents evicted from the country on 6 November. The Burmese government also announced the unprecedented step of withdrawing recognition of the DPRK as an independent state. These two actions reflected the anger of the Burmese leader Ne Win, 'not least because it had been his own careful and painstakingly implemented strategy to sustain the often-questioned close party and state links with Pyongyang' (TNA, FCO15/3489).

V. North Korean Motivations

Based on the North Korean regime's longstanding hostility and ideological antagonism towards its southern neighbour as well as the historical context and patterns of their political environment during the 1970s and 1980s, the authors have identified the following four possible motives behind the assassination attempt on Chun Doo Hwan. This section will critically examine each of these four rationales in turn, and evaluate their plausibility in accounting for the North Korean Government's motives in attempting to assassinate Chun Doo Hwan.

A. Political Decapitation as a Prelude to War

The first possible rationale was the North Korean belief that the assassination of Chun would politically decapitate and paralyse the ROK's political leadership. This hypothesis presupposes that Pyongyang saw the fomenting of internal dissent within the ROK as an opportunity to inflict a power vacuum in the ROK's nerve centre, sowing political instability in Seoul. By decapitating the ROK's government in such a spectacular fashion, the resulting turmoil and lack of effective leadership in Seoul would create an opportunity for the North Korean military to launch an invasion across the DMZ and thus unify the Korean Peninsula under Pyongyang's control. Such calculations may be comparable to those that guided the January 1968 Blue House Raid assassination attempt on Park Chung Hee. In the months preceding the Blue House Raid, North Korea had begun infiltrating special forces units into the South Korean countryside, presumably to initiate and operate behind-the-lines guerrilla operations against the ROK military as part of a North Korean invasion. More notably, at the extended plenum of the KWP Central Committee in June-July 1967, Kim Il Sung had called on party cadres to 'prepare to give assistance to the struggle of our South Korean brethren', presumably a reference to Pyongyang's calculations that the ROK citizenry would respond to the death of the authoritarian Park by supporting a North Korean invasion as a liberating force. This speech was followed shortly after by the formation and training of the Unit 124 to carry out the attack on the Blue House (Bolger 1991, 61-65).

Such a hypothesis may be plausible in the context of the Blue House Raid in 1968 given that the ROK then remained an impoverished country with an ill-equipped military, even whilst its ally, the US, was becoming increasingly embroiled in the quagmire of Vietnam. This hypothesis is, however, rather less than satisfying in accounting for the 1983 Rangoon Bombing, for three reasons. First, if the assassination attempt on Chun Doo Hwan was indeed meant to be the opening shot of a renewed North Korean attempt to invade the South, it would have been logical for Pyongyang to place its armed forces at full readiness to seize and exploit the element of surprise in the aftermath of a successful assassination of Chun. Yet, it is notable that US and ROK surveillance did not notice any changes in the deployment patterns of North Korean armoured forces activities on the DMZ that would have been consistent with a preparation for a full-scale invasion (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, p.111).

A second reason to reject this hypothesis concerns the growing military superiority enjoyed by the ROK over North Korea by the time of the Rangoon Bombing. The ROK's growing economic clout during the 1970s, combined with concerns over the

US commitment to the alliance during this period,³ had led to South Korea substantially increasing its defence budget to hedge against the prospect of US alliance abandonment. In 1974, the ROK had begun acquisition of advanced US-designed F-4E and F-5E fighters (ROK Ministry of National Defense 2015, 34-35). Although the initial models of these aircraft dated back to the 1950s, the heavily upgraded versions that the ROKAF acquired were more than a match for the 1960s-era MIG-19s and MIG-21s of the North Korean Air Force (Hamm 2001). Likewise, in the aftermath of the withdrawal of the US 7th Infantry Division, the ROK undertook the 'First Yul-Gok' plan, which involved the formation of the ROK Army's first mechanised infantry division to secure the roads leading from the DMZ to Seoul, along with the acquisition of 'Honest John' surface-to-surface missiles, upgraded M48 tanks, anti-tank attack helicopters (ROK Ministry of National Defense 2015, 34-35). Against the growing strength of the ROK Army, the DPRK's Korean People's Army remained equipped with 1960s-era T62 tanks of dubious effectiveness against the rapidly modernizing South Korean military (Hamm 2001). In light of the significant technological advantages enjoyed by the South Korean military over the North, it is unlikely that Pyongyang could have conceived the possibility of an invasion of the South as a successful enterprise following the assassination of a ROK Head of State.

The third reason to reject this hypothesis concerns the foreign relations that Pyongyang and Seoul had with their superpower patrons, Beijing on the one hand, and Washington on the other. If the assassination of the ROK Head of State was intended as a prelude to a North Korean invasion of the South, the 1960s and early 1970s was a more plausible opportunity for such an enterprise. The 1960s and early 1970s marked the height of China's ideological fanaticism during the Cultural Revolution, occurring at the same time as the US military was bogged down in Vietnam until its withdrawal from that country in 1973.

The context of Korean relations with China and US had, however, significantly changed by the time of the Rangoon Bombing, in the ROK's favour. In 1975, following

3 In 1969, US President Richard Nixon had announced the Guam Doctrine, under which the US chose to downsize the extent of its security commitments in the Asia Pacific region. This was followed by the withdrawal of the US 7th Infantry Division from Korea in 1971, leaving only the 2nd Infantry Division as the sole combat unit of the US Army in South Korea. During his presidency, Jimmy Carter further added to South Korean fears by repeatedly calling for the removal of all remaining US ground forces from Korea. Although Carter was thwarted from doing so by his advisors, Park Chung Hee greatly feared that the US was prepared to militarily abandon South Korea as it had done with South Vietnam in 1975, resulting in the ROK leader undertaking a massive modernisation of the South Korean military during the late 1970s.

the collapse of South Vietnam, Kim Il Sung apparently believed that a successful invasion of the South was possible with Chinese support. In the North Korean leader's 1975 visit to Beijing, however, Kim Il Sung's request for China to support such an endeavor was rejected by Mao Zedong, given the Chinese leader's decision to prioritise Beijing's diplomatic ties with the US (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 50-51). Moreover, from 1976 onwards, in a bid to assuage South Korean fears of alliance abandonment, the Pentagon had commenced a long-running series of massive US-ROK military exercises, code-named 'Team Spirit', based on the contingent scenario of a North Korean invasion of the South (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 61). Involving the deployment of tens of thousands of US troops equipped with the latest military hardware to undertake the full range of air and land combat maneuvers, the Team Spirit exercises emphasized to Pyongyang that it had little reason to believe that an invasion of the South could succeed. If there was any doubt in Pyongyang on US resolve, such uncertainty was unambiguously clarified in 1976 during the 'Ax Murders' incident, when two US soldiers cutting down a tree on the DMZ were murdered by North Korean sentries. The ensuing US response included the deployment of combat forces to escort a heavily-armed convoy to cut the tree down in question (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 59-66). Moreover, it should be recalled that, having assumed the US Presidency in 1981 on a platform of strident hostility towards Communism, the extent of Ronald Reagan's resolve to maintain alliance solidarity with the ROK was reflected in his welcoming President Chun to the White House on a state visit in 1981, in spite of the controversies arising from Chun's brutal suppression of the Gwangju Uprising the previous year (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 108). This pattern of events doubtless left the Pyongyang with little ambiguity that the US was prepared to inflict massive military retaliation against any North Korean provocation. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that the North Korean leadership could have conceived an invasion of the South as an operationally viable course of action to be implemented in the aftermath of the assassination of Chun.

B. Internal Subversion of the ROK

A second, related hypothesis is that the assassination attempt was an attempt to weaken the ROK's political leadership from within. If US-ROK military capabilities were becoming too strong for North Korea to contemplate launching a conventional invasion, Pyongyang may have believed that it was still possible to create a power vacuum in Seoul. The latter could be filled by a left-leaning South Korean Government that would be willing to advocate the abrogation of the alliance with the US, and support

unification of the peninsula under terms favourable to Pyongyang.

As noted earlier, Chun was deeply hated by the Korean public after the Gwangju massacre. Moreover, the US had acquiesced to Chun's use of ROK frontline army units from the DMZ to suppress the Gwangju Uprising. US Army General Wickham enjoyed peacetime operational control of the ROK Army units near the DMZ and could have, if he so chose, acted to prevent Chun's crackdown on Gwangju. Instead, the fact that Wickham and US Ambassador Gleysteen chose not to stop the crackdown on Gwangju generated intense anti-American sentiment in Korea (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 98-103). Under the circumstances, Pyongyang may have calculated that assassinating Chun would lead to a power vacuum in Seoul, and one that could conceivably be filled by a more anti-American, pro-Pyongyang faction. In this sense, it is possible that Pyongyang was inspired by the pattern of events surrounding the 1979 assassination of Park Chung Hee. Although North Korea did not have a hand in that event (Park was assassinated by his own Director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Jae Kyu,⁴) the North Korean leadership may have seen parallels between the unpopularity of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. Both strongmen had become increasingly unpopular due to their authoritarian rule. In Park's case, so unpopular had his rule become that, in spite of his efforts in bringing prosperity to the ROK, the US officials who attended Park's funeral found little grief amongst Park's subordinates or the South Korean public (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 90). Transplanted into the context of 1983, it is possible that Pyongyang, having failed to capitalize on the aftermath of Park's assassination in 1979, saw an opportunity to exploit the simmering discontent towards Chun's equally unpopular rule. Assassination of Chun would create a power vacuum in Seoul that could be filled by anti-conservative ROK factions as part of the backlash against the two decades of brutal authoritarian rule of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. Such an outcome would presumably be more left-leaning and anti-American, and thus be more assertive in demanding the withdrawal of the US military in Korea, or even more amenable to unification on Pyongyang's terms without the DPRK having to launch an actual, risky invasion of the South.

Whilst such a claim is somewhat more plausible, there are still some gaps that undermine this hypothesis. If the attempt to assassinate Chun was part of a concerted

4 Kim Jae Kyu's own motivations remain heavily debated. Although he was a long-time friend of Park Chung Hee, his relations with the latter had grown increasingly strained by 1979. In Oberdorfer's account, Kim shot Park whilst calling the President's security chief, Cha Chi Chol, a 'miserable worm', suggesting a personal grudge. At his later trial, however, Kim justified his assassination of Park on the grounds of reviving democracy in the ROK. (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 87-92).

effort by Pyongyang to undertake subversion of the ROK Government, the success of such an end-result would have been dependent on coordinated efforts to simultaneously eliminate Chun's instruments of internal security and coercion. These were, namely, the South Korean military's Defense Security Command (DSC), and the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP) (this was previously known as Korean Central Intelligence Agency, or KCIA, under Park Chung Hee; it was renamed by Chun in 1981 as the ANSP, and renamed the National Intelligence Service, or NIS, in 1999).

During his *coup d'état* in December 1979, Chun, as Commander of the DSC, had relied on troops under his command to capture ROK Army Chief of Staff General Jeong Seung-Hwa, Administrator of Martial Law under Acting President Choi Kyu-Ha. In addition, based on the logic of this hypothesis, Pyongyang would have likely undertaken concurrent operations to eliminate Chun's old friend and classmate, Roh Tae Woo. Chun's seizure of power in December 1979 had succeeded due to support from Roh's 9th Division that left its position near the DMZ to add muscle to Chun's coup. If the North Korean leadership was serious about attempting to create a power vacuum in Seoul, it surely would have undertaken simultaneous operations to remove Roh as well as neutralizing the commanders of other military units in Seoul, in order to prevent Chun's allies from reestablishing authoritarian control of the country. Instead, there is no evidence to indicate that Pyongyang undertook any such operations to successfully exploit a post-Chun power vacuum, resulting in Roh waiting at Kimpo Airport to receive Chun in the aftermath of the Rangoon Bombing (Haberma 1987).

C. A Campaign of Diplomatic Isolation

A third possible hypothesis in accounting for the Rangoon bombing is that it may have been an attempt to prevent any further deterioration of North Korea's international standing due to the growing prosperity and status of the ROK. Such a rationale has been cited by Kim Eungseo, who emphasizes the extent to which the ROK had surpassed the North economically by the mid-1970s, leading to the North Korean leadership to recognize that Seoul's political influence was begin to outstrip Pyongyang's. From this angle, Kim Il Sung saw these trends as portending the forthcoming diplomatic isolation of North Korea (Kim 2017). During the 1970s, the DPRK had attempted to gain influence in the developing world by joining the NAM (Buzo 2002, 129). However, the same period saw the ROK's own rise to growing diplomatic prominence, with the ROK beginning to surpass the North economically as well as diplomatically. While not itself a member of NAM, South Korea under Chun was utilizing economic diplomacy

to influence member states; in the view of one Japanese scholar, preventing this approach from developing further could have been the motive for Pyongyang's assassination attempt (Takesada 1987, 87). Aside from the ROK's growing prosperity and international diplomatic profile, in 1981, Seoul won the rights to host two major sporting events, the Asian Games in 1986 and the Olympics in 1988. This hypothesis would suggest that Pyongyang increasingly feared the prospect of isolation and being left behind by the South on the world stage. (Oh and Hassig 2000, 170-71)

Moreover, the early 1980s had also seen the beginnings of the ROK's efforts to promote trade and political links with the North's two major patrons, the Soviet Union and China, as part of a long-term South Korean diplomacy strategy to isolate Pyongyang and thus achieve unification on Seoul's terms (Chung 2006, 67-74). Foreign Minister Lee Bum Suk, who was to die in the Rangoon bombing, had outlined in June 1983 a *Nordpolitik* strategy which included aiming to normalize relations with the Soviet Union and China (Park 1993, 218). Given that Chun's policy of *Nordpolitik* engagement with Pyongyang included the proposal for an inter-Korean conference to plan for unification for the peninsula, it is possible that Pyongyang increasingly feared the prospect of being absorbed by the South (Snyder 2018, 49). In addition, Kim Eungseo notes that the DPRK was increasingly fearful of the prospect of its erstwhile superpower patrons, Moscow and Beijing, furthering their relations with Seoul at the expense of Pyongyang. Kim argued that the North Korean leadership had deliberately sought to instigate a crisis on the Korean Peninsula that, by provoking the US into re-affirming alliance relations with Seoul, would force Moscow and Beijing to present a united front against US influence in Northeast Asia (Kim 2017). Seen from this angle, the Rangoon bombing may have been a diplomatic offensive intended to perpetuate Cold War tensions and hence the usefulness of North Korea to Moscow and Beijing, whilst simultaneously attempting to counter-isolate the ROK (Suh 1988, 231-37, 293). Similarly, Buzo argued that the North Korean leadership took the view that

the removal of Chun and many of his advisers would constitute a major step towards unleashing the revolutionary potential in ROK society while also going some of the way toward slowing the rate at which the ROK was now outperforming the DPRK economically and diplomatically (Buzo 1999, 125-6).

If this hypothesis is true, it may account for other North Korean operations such as the bomb attack that destroyed Korean Air flight 858 over the Indian Ocean in 1987, as an attempt to intimidate travelers from visiting Seoul during the 1988 Olympics

(Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 142-43).

Such a hypothesis is, however, not particularly convincing in accounting for the Rangoon bombing itself, given the nature of North Korea's diplomatic relations in the run-up to that operation. During the mid-1970s, with Washington's efforts to reduce tensions in Asia and thus concentrate on the Cold War rivalry with the USSR, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had solicited Beijing's efforts as an intermediary to rein in Pyongyang's hostility towards Seoul (Lawler, Mahan and Keefer 2009, 117). This included a US proposal, conveyed via Beijing, to withdraw the US military presence in South Korea at some stage in the future if Pyongyang was willing to enter into talks with Seoul and Washington and adopt a more conciliatory foreign policy towards the ROK (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 112-13).

For the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kim Il Sung had balked at these diplomatic feelers. On 8 October 1983, however – the day before the Rangoon bomb attack, Kim Il Sung, conveyed, via Beijing, his acceptance of high-level, three-way talks between Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 112). Given the strong alliance relations between Reagan and Chun during the 1980s, Pyongyang presumably had an assurance from Beijing that the DPRK would continue to receive strong Chinese backing in inter-Korean talks (Jin 2018, 21). Under such a backdrop, the brazen nature of the assassination attempt on Chun in Rangoon was puzzling. Within the context of inter-Korean talks, the extent of North Korea's isolation would have made it heavily dependent on Chinese goodwill to counter the extent of US influence. Given the extent to which China's paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, had expended Chinese political capital to broker a high-level meeting between Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington, it is inconceivable that the North Korean leadership could have failed to acknowledge how such a flagrant attack on the ROK would have damaged China's credibility in the eyes of the US, and, by extension, jeopardised Pyongyang's own ties with Beijing and left Pyongyang even more isolated. Deng, in particular, held Kim Jong Il responsible for the Rangoon bombing – at a time when Beijing was also seeking to improve relations with Burma - and refused to meet the younger Kim for the remainder of the Chinese leader's life (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 113). Nor is it plausible that Pyongyang could have carried out the bombing whilst realistically denying DPRK culpability – in light of the long track record of North Korean hostility and provocations towards the South and its past assassination attempts on Park Chung Hee, the default position of the media as well as the US and ROK Governments would have been directed at the possibility of North Korean involvement. By way of comparison, in the immediate aftermath of Park's assassination by his KCIA chief in 1979, US and ROK surveillance was

immediately activated to search for North Korean culpability (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 88).

Moreover, the North Korean leadership was well aware of the extent of the international taboo it was breaking in attempting to assassinate the ROK Head of State; in 1982, North Korea had contemplated an assassination attempt on Chun Doo Hwan during a ROK diplomatic visit to Gabon in 1982, only to back down for fears of alienating Pyongyang's friends in Africa (Tucker 2001, 431). Under such circumstances, given that Kim Il Sung was preparing to enter a sensitive stage of diplomacy with Seoul and Washington, it can scarcely be believed that Kim Il Sung would estrange his own regime from Beijing, as one of the two major powers (the other being the Soviet Union) that could be relied on to strengthen North Korea's negotiating hand vis-à-vis the US and ROK. In the aftermath of the Rangoon bombing, Beijing was enraged that its attempts at diplomacy had been sabotaged by North Korea, as reflected in the cancellation of diplomatic contact with North Korean officials for several months (Tucker 2001, 431). When the verdicts from the trial of the North Korean agents were issued, the Chinese official media pointedly published the Burmese official report at the same time as the North's riposte to emphasize Beijing's anger towards Pyongyang (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 113). Likewise, the brazen nature of North Korea's actions also damaged the ties in the NAM that Pyongyang had spent so much effort developing during the 1970s; Burma cut diplomatic ties with North Korea altogether, and the majority of members of the NAM were unanimous in their condemnation of Pyongyang's actions (Iglauer 2014).

D. Kim Jong Il's Bid to Reinforce Dynastic Succession

A fourth, and in the opinion of the authors, the most convincing, possible rationale for the Rangoon bombing may have stemmed from domestic politicking in Pyongyang. By the early 1980s, Kim Il Sung was in his 70s, and yet there appeared little realistic prospect of achieving the unification of the Korean Peninsula under his rule. With the beckoning of old age, his son, Kim Jong Il, was designated as his successor at the Sixth Congress of the KWP in 1980. At the same time, however, it should be recalled that the backgrounds of the two Kims were very different.

As a young man, Kim Il Sung had been able to make a name for himself as a guerrilla fighter against the Japanese occupation of Korea (Oh and Hassig 2000, 100). Although the older Kim was the leader of only one of several anti-Japanese guerrilla movements, North Korean control of the state media enabled Kim Il Sung to generate

a personality cult surrounding himself, thereby enshrining his legitimacy in the eyes of the country (Lankov 2005, 202-08). In line with the importance with which Confucian societal norms placed on hierarchy, this translated into North Korean state organs' automatic deference to, and deification of, Kim Il Sung (Martin 2006, 320).

In contrast, Kim Jong Il lacked the revolutionary and martial background of his father. DPRK state media portrayals of the near-mythological status of Kim Jong Il's birth notwithstanding, historical records indicate that the younger Kim was born in North Korean guerrilla in the Russian Far East, and spent the Korean War studying in the relative safety of China (Martin 2006, 203-09). Under these circumstances, it is apparent that Kim Jong Il saw the urgency of establishing his martial credentials to affirm himself as a worthy successor to his aging father (Martin 2006, 270-85).

Set against the backdrop of North Korea's longstanding siege mentality, it is apparent that Kim Jong Il may have decided to make the best of the continuing reality of the US-ROK alliance as an external bogeyman to the security of North Korea. Interviewed by one of the authors in 2012, Daniel Pinkston noted that

The North Koreans see a capitalist world dominated by the U.S. that continues to pose an existential security threat that seeks to enslave the DPRK ... the North Korean focus on military strength reflects a deeply internalised recollection of the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides.⁵

As an authoritarian state that relied on its secret police and paramilitary forces to maintain internal security against threats to the regime, it is hardly surprising that a significant component of the North Korean state's ideological identity was premised on the primacy of its military in the DPRK's hierarchy of power. Set against such a backdrop, Kim Jong Il presumably saw the need to affirm his martial credentials to the DPRK's internal instruments of state security that would prove crucial to his succession to power in the years ahead. Under such circumstances, the continuing North Korean security threat to the ROK could be used to provoke Seoul into abandoning diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang, whilst simultaneously goading the US into continued alignment with the ROK. Under such circumstances, the continued US-ROK alliance could be capitalised on by North Korean state media to underscore the notion of an existential military threat to Pyongyang. This would thence enable Kim Jong Il to project himself as the defender of the nation and thus consolidate his succession

⁵ Daniel Pinkston, interviewed by Er-Win Tan, in Seoul, Republic of Korea, 7 June 2012.

within Pyongyang over potential rivals.

Based on this hypothesis, Kim Jong Il may well have deliberately ordered this action as a means of strengthening his own hold over the party and military apparatuses, and to promote himself as a credible figure with the credentials to command the respect of the DPRK's military establishment (Kim 2017). The three-way talks that Kim Il Sung had unexpectedly called for with Seoul and Washington would have reduced regional tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and thus diminished the importance of a martial tradition in the political hierarchy of Pyongyang; conversely, a blatant armed attack on the leadership of the ROK would, even if unsuccessful, have the effect of re-escalating inter-Korean tensions, thereby ensuring the continued primacy influence of the North Korean military within Pyongyang circles. In addition, given that such instigation of regional tensions would reinforce the image of a hostile world surrounding Pyongyang, it would have had the effect of enabling Kim Jong Il to portray his martial credentials to underscore his role as the defender of the DPRK's sovereignty (Byman and Lind 2010, 52). In short, the North Korean military and Kim Jong Il both had a vested interest in ensuring the continued tensions on the Korean Peninsula inasmuch as such an environment would enable them to consolidate themselves in the political hierarchy of Pyongyang. In addition, Kim Jong Il presumably calculated that he could act independently from his father's foreign policy and still be spared recrimination because of his position of privilege as the son and designated successor of Kim Il Sung.

This perspective is supported both by the facts on the ground that were uncovered by the Burmese authorities in the aftermath of the bombing, by various ROK, Japanese and US diplomats and scholars, as well as statements issued by the high-profile North Korean defector, Hwang Jang-Yop. Investigations by the Burmese authorities uncovered an extremely high level of planning and preparation by the DPRK's intelligence apparatus and diplomatic corps for the Rangoon attack. As noted earlier, Kang Min-Chul, one of the two North Korean operatives to have been captured by the Burmese authorities, confessed to his part in the bombing. Kang's testimony claimed that he and his colleagues had left North Korea on board a DPRK-operated freighter a month before the attack on Chun's delegation, and prepared for their operation with weapons and equipment at a safe house provided by the DPRK Embassy in Rangoon (Bermudez 1990, 139-40; Selth 2004, 7). Kang also claimed that his orders to participate in the operation came from General Kang Chung Su, claimed by ROK officials to be a senior commander in the Korean People's Army Special Operation Force (Chapman 1983). Given the elite status of the latter as a critical instrument of internal regime security within Pyongyang, it is difficult to conceive the possibility that General Kang could have ordered the

operation without authorisation from a very senior-ranking member of the DPRK's leadership (Selth 2004, 11). This perspective was entertained by the South Korean government, which in one of its official publications only a month after the trial ended claimed that Kim Jong Il 'masterminded' the plot, which was carried out under his 'direct instruction' (KOIS 1983, 40-41).

This hypothesis thus addresses the apparent contradiction in Pyongyang's coordination of policy – as noted earlier, in the run-up to the Rangoon bombing, Kim Il Sung had sought three-way talks with Seoul and Washington. Given that Kim Il Sung had accepted the position of Chun Doo Hwan as interlocutor for the ROK, even whilst North Korea remained reliant on China's superpower patronage in such a scenario, there is little convincing logic to claim that Kim Il Sung would sabotage his own diplomatic initiative whilst simultaneously damaging ties with his most important ally, Beijing (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 113).

Further reinforcing the explanatory strength of this hypothesis are compelling clues from the testimony of Hwang Jang Yop, the former Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme National Assembly. Hwang, who defected to the ROK in 1997, was the highest ranking member of the Worker's Party of Korea to have ever abandoned the DPRK, and his insight into the inner workings of the Workers' Party of Korea in Pyongyang must be emphasised. Hwang claimed that Kim Jong Il was the 'mastermind' behind the Rangoon incident (Cha 2013, 86). Living in exile, Hwang testified that Kim Jong Il had 'a morbid interest in terrorism and personally controls all terrorist attacks initiated by North Korea', including authorization for the Rangoon bombing (Hwang 2003).

Additional support for this hypothesis is reflected in how Kim Jong Il's leadership of North Korea as Supreme Leader of North Korea from 1994 to 2011 continued to be characterized by his increasing codification of himself as a strong martial leader as the basis for his claims to leadership of the country. Upon his succession to the position of Supreme Leader of North Korea following his father's death in 1994, Kim Jong Il continued to emphasize his martial credentials as the basis for affirming the legitimacy of his succession. Byung Chul Koh noted that, as Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Il dramatically increased the size and scope of such state demonstrations of the DPRK's military capabilities – in particular, massive military parades, and missile and nuclear tests (Koh 1997, 3). Moreover, in the years following his succession, Kim Jong Il effectively codified these elements of a martial state identity into his signature doctrine, known as 'Songun', or 'Military First Politics' (Scobell and Sanford 2007, 28-29). The latter granted luxury goods and increased influence to senior members of the North

Korean military establishment, pointing to Kim Jong Il's identification of the DPRK's military apparatus as his most critical ally in ensuring regime security (Byman and Lind 2010, 58-59).

VI. Conclusions

Based on this empirical analysis of the underlying motivations behind the 1983 Rangoon bombing, the authors conclude by emphasising Pyongyang's willingness to occasionally use targeted action overseas in an attempt to achieve specific aims in seeking to advance the interests of the North Korean leadership. This goes to the extent of Pyongyang's willingness to sustain collateral damage to its diplomatic standing and bilateral relations with countries where such covert operations took place, if sufficiently high-profile targets of the North Korean leadership can be eliminated. Although the DPRK has not taken any direct action against any subsequent South Korean president since 1983, the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, the estranged half-brother of current leader Kim Jong Un, in Malaysia in 2017 attests to Pyongyang's willingness to use covert action on occasion.

Whilst the present moment finds the DPRK eschewing such high-profile assassination attacks against South Korean targets, it is likely that this restraint has stemmed from the present North Korea leadership's concern over the emergence of ardent policy hawks in Washington and the propensity of the Trump Administration for reckless policymaking. In particular, Trump's appointment of John Bolton, a longstanding advocate of regime change in North Korea, as his National Security Advisor in 2017 has likely given rise to Kim Jong Un's concern that overly tipping his hand in foreign policy adventures may be used by an increasingly hawkish Washington as a pretext to initiate a war of regime change. Whilst the North Korean regime remains as ruthless and Machiavellian as ever, it is not suicidal, and recognizes that an overtly aggressive operation against the South will, by drawing the attention of policy hawks in Washington, likely be seized by anti-North Korea voices to justify military action against the regime. Nonetheless, over the longer term and barring any sign of a distinct and fundamental change in the mentality of the North Korean leadership, the kind of targeted covert operations that it had carried out in 1983 will likely remain a part of Pyongyang's toolbox for eliminating overseas-based threats to the regime and its interests.

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