

# Assassination of President Park Chung-hee and Korean-American Relations: Reactions from American Newspapers

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**Abstract** - Washington reacted to fulfill her obligation with South Korea after the assassination of Park Chung-hee. Washington firmly warned North Korea and sent early warning aircraft with the naval task forces to the region. American newspapers supported Washington's decision of early responses. Meanwhile there were divided opinions on the Washington's role for the internal affairs of South Korea. Some newspapers urged that Washington should play a role to restore democracy while others insisted that Koreans should control their own future. The death of Park Chung-hee resurfaced the American dilemma between the defender of democracy and the traditional non-involvement policy again.

**Keywords:** Park Chung-hee; South Korea; Assassination; U.S. Foreign Policy; Jimmy Carter; North Korea; Public Opinions

## 1. Introduction

On October 26, 1979 South Korean President Park Chung-hee and his chief bodyguard were shot to death by Kim Jae-gyu, the head of the KCIA. Next day, Premier Choi Gyu-hah became the acting President and the new government imposed Martial law over the entire country except Jeju Island. A curfew and press censorship was imposed while all universities were closed down. The law banned all meetings and outdoor demonstrations.

The U.S. forces in South Korea were placed on the alert and the U.S. naval ships were sent to South Korean waters to deter North Korea from taking any military advantage of the crisis. President Jimmy Carter quickly warned North Korea not to make any mistake while assuring the U.S. commitment for the security of South Korea. A State Department official said that U.S. had contacted several countries, including Japan, China and the Soviet Union, calling on them to make certain that the situation in South Korea would not be exacerbated.

This shocking news reached the U.S. and American newspapers quickly responded. The editorials of many American newspapers dealt with the incident as the chance to reveal the South Korea and its significances to the U.S. foreign policy. They responded the U.S. military responses while advising the future role of the U.S. in South Korea.

The U.S. early military reaction for the security of South Korea was revealed throughout the newspapers. The role of the U.S. for the future of South Korea was also debated and evaluated.

Since there are no diplomatic documents available to public on this issue yet, using American newspapers is a proper way to see what happened at the time of crisis in 1979. Also, examining the American newspapers is one of the best ways to see the public opinion on the issue. This subject would help to understand how the Korean-American Relations work at the time of crisis.

The public opinions reflected in the American newspapers showed that the U.S. early reaction to send the early warning aircraft and the naval task forces were proper for helping the ally in East Asia. Since it was the

time of Cold War, American public opinions the U.S. acted well to stop the death of Park Chung-hee to escalate military tension in Korean peninsular. Although some of them worried about the possibility of the military conflict, most of the newspapers editorials considered that the action was proper and correct.

However, on the issue of the U.S. role in the internal affairs of South Korea in the near future after the assassination, the public opinions were divided. Some of them urged not to involve while some insisted more positive role to create democratic Republic of Korea.

This research focuses on those two issues. It provides the views on how American public opinions react to the foreign affairs on the crisis of a foreign country. At the same time, it reveals the American attitude about the dilemma of the U.S. as a defender of world democracy while pursuing the national interests.

## 2. American Newspapers' Reactions to the Early Response of the U.S.

As it mentioned before, The U.S. government quickly reacted to the crisis in South Korea by warning North Korea taking any military action against South Korea. On October 27, President Jimmy Carter quickly responded and announced the strong support for the new government of South Korea. He also pointed out that the U.S. made military action to secure South Korea from any possible outside threat.

In general, most of the American newspapers considered that President Carter's action was correct and appropriate. *The Milwaukee Journal* pointed out that President Carter's rapid affirmation of American support for South Korea after the murder of dictatorial Korean President Park Chung-hee was appropriate. It emphasized that American had a great stake in South Korea's stability. (*The Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 29)

It continued that the Republic of Korea was not just another Third World nation. It was both strategically and economically important to the U.S. President Carter's action was appropriate because South Korea was in great danger. After the death of Park, there was no strong,

nationally recognized leader to rally the country and offset the strong leadership image presented by Communist North Korea's Kim Il-song.

*The Chattanooga Times* also showed similar response. It stated that President Carter had properly demonstrated the country's continued commitment to its treaty obligations with South Korea. (*The Chattanooga Times*, Oct. 29) *The Cincinnati Post* on October 30 shared same stance. According to this newspaper, so far Washington had acted wisely to discourage Kim Il-song from again trying to reunite Korea under his rule. It had alerted the 39,000 U.S. troops in the South, sent early warning aircraft and a carrier task force to the area and issued strong hands-off signal to Kim.

*St. Louis Globe-Democrat* also considered that President Carter responded appropriately by ordering the U.S. naval and aerial forces to be alert to any menacing move by North Korea. (*St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Oct. 30) *The Detroit News* of October 31 also demonstrated the support for the U.S. early response. According to this newspaper, the initial American response just after the assassination of South Korean President Park was swift and correct. The editorial of *Chicago Tribune* of October 30 pointed out that South Korea and the U.S. military had warned North Korea not to think Park's death weakens South Korea's ability and resolve to resist attack. In general, Americans felt that President Carter managed the situation well for the crisis developed by the unexpected assassination took place in South Korea.

*New York Post* of October 29, 1979 also supported the American decision, too. According to this short editorial, the U.S. had properly let it be known that it would not remain aloof from any North Korean effort to play games with the crisis of transition in Seoul. It pointed out that the U.S. would continue its effort to secure South Korean security until the transition to be completed.

Meanwhile, some newspapers showed the feeling of discomfort for the U.S. action. *Sentinel Star* of Orlando, Florida insisted that there was little the U.S. could do except warn North Korea not to exploit the circumstances. It believed that President Carter had already done about all he could by ordering American military elements in South Korea to full alert and moving a carrier task into the China [West] Sea. It advised that the U.S. should sit back and let the South Koreans themselves sort things out including her security. (*Sentinel Star*, Oct. 30)

*The State of Columbia*, South Carolina of October 30 reflected similar opinion. It warned that the U.S. warnings, coupled with the movement of American naval and air units into the area might contribute to the North Korean stance. North Korea maintained the stance that Korean reunification issues should be resolved by Koreans. Kim Il-song blamed the U.S. military presence in South Korea was the major obstacle for this development. This editorial worried about this problem of the justification of stationing the combat troops in South Korea would hurt Washington diplomatically.

*The Saginaw News* of Michigan pointed out that the U.S. troops in South Korea prevented Kim Il-song's attempt to reunify Korea with force. However, it might develop into a situation that the U.S. embroiled in combat. (*The Saginaw News*, Oct. 30) For this reason, Park's assassination brought America to the point that stationing

U.S. troops in the Asian mainland carried great risk. The presence of the U.S. troops might well have prevented war, not involved America in one. It reflected that some Americans feared that Korea could become another Vietnam.

*Charleston Evening Post* of South Carolina introduced an interview that the U.S. military commander in South Korea. According to this interview, the U.S. and South Korean forces were adequate to meet any possible requirement that might develop after the assassination. Still, this newspaper editorial believed that the U.S. was being tested again. When the situation could develop like Korean War for 30 years ago, the U.S. needed to make a choice whether nuclear weapons could be used or not. (*Charleston Evening Post*, Oct. 30) That was why the U.S. needed to be more careful. Military involvement in Korean peninsula could put the U.S. into a diplomatic and military problem.

On the other hand, several newspapers supported more military commitment of the U.S. in South Korea. *The Indianapolis Star* on November 3 welcomed the development that President Carter assured acting President Choi Gyu-hah of the Republic of Korea that the U.S. would continue to stand firmly behind its treaty commitment. Still, it urged that the U.S. must keep up with this assurance. At this point, a group of U.S. senators had gone to court in an effort to get the Carter administration to live up to its treaty commitment to Taiwan. It urged that South Korea should not be treated as Taiwan.

Two newspapers from the state of Oklahoma urged the U.S. government a stronger actions in South Korea. *The Daily Oklahoman* on October 31 emphasized that the President Carter's plan for the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from South Korea was a dead issue now. The early response was good, but the assassination proved that the American military presence would remain essential for the security and peace of South Korea and Asia. That is why the U.S. must remain or enhance the military commitment in Korean peninsula according to this newspaper.

*Tulsa World* said that Americans could take comfort in the fact that President Carter changed his mind a few months ago about pulling the U.S. combat forces out of the troubled South Korea. The current situation proved that the presence of the U.S. troops in South Korea was preventing possible North Korean attack. According to this newspaper, the U.S. had a very special investment in South Korea's fate since many Americans lost their lives to maintain South Korea's independence during the three years of Korean War of 1950. (*Tulsa World*, Oct. 30)

As it reflected, American newspapers supported the U.S. early response to the South Korea's crisis in general. Although some of them worried about the possible escalation of military tension that the U.S. could not avoid more military involvement, American public opinion was supporting the U.S. role to maintain the security of South Korea. Some of them showed the discomfort that the U.S. had supported undemocratic leader Park Chung-hee. Still, American public reactions reflected in the newspapers showed that it supported American decision to prevent possible attack by Kim Il-song's North Korea right after the death of Park Chung-

hee.

### 3. American Public Opinions on the U.S. Role in South Korea's Internal Development

The most interesting, but significant issue after the sudden death of Park Chung-hee was the role of the U.S. for the power transition taking place in the Republic of Korea. South Korea under the Park Chung-hee developed a conflict on the issues of democracy and human rights. Even the official visit of Jimmy Carter to Seoul could not resolve the problem completely.

American public opinion in the newspaper editorials divided into two major categories. More active involvement for the various reasons was one while others discourage the intervention of the internal situation of South Korea. There were a few editorials tried to maintain moderate stance. It was the dilemma that the U.S. government also worried about at this point.

*The Milwaukee Journal* on October 29 considered that internally South Korea's economic success had produced unfulfilled expectations and social pressures that were increasingly difficult to contain under the kind of iron discipline imposed by Park. Diplomatically, South Korea needed U.S. support to maintain the country's security. For those reasons, it insisted that President Carter should use the leverage to pressure for moderate political change in South Korea. It added an advice that Washington should not expect same kind of democracy in South Korea because of the military threat from North Korea and the culture of father-figure leadership. Still, it insisted that there was a need for relaxation of restraints on civil and political liberties. Carter was in a strong position to help bring about those basic changes. In conclusion, this editorial urged a strong involvement of the U.S. government to bring at least a moderate democracy in South Korea.

*New York Post* on October 29 also expressed the similar opinion. It pointed out that Washington could make the Park's death as a chance for the South Korea to recapture some of the freedom Park had systematically destroyed. Still, it warned that America should not dictate the shape of events. The U.S. could give moral support to those committed to find something better for South Korea than the Park dictatorship.

*The Chattanooga Times* of October 30 insisted that the Washington's Cold War diplomacy needed to be changed now. Because of the strategic importance of South Korea, Washington should not ignore the demands of the protestors in South Korea. Washington needed to realize that they were virtually anti-Communists with legitimate cause. It emphasized that the early response of the U.S. confirmed that the U.S. military support was crucial for the security of South Korea. Washington must use the situation and occasion of the Park's death as a chance to strengthen South Korea in a more fundamental way by encouraging a more democratic society.

*The Providence Journal* of Rhode Island on October 30 emphasized that the U.S. as a longtime supplier of aid to South Korea and as a defender-by treaty, needed to find itself in a position of pivotal importance to South Korea's future. According to this editorial, there was a larger opportunity that the Carter administration to urge South

Korea to discard the repressive powers of the Park era. The U.S. was uniquely positioned to assure South Korea's safety with its treaty guarantee while seeking its pledges of protection for individual rights as the leader of free World. It insisted that the accomplishment of this goal would make South Korea a vital U.S. ally in East Asia and its people would gain freedom at the same time. That is, according to this editorial, Washington's involvement would be a win-win situation for both nations.

*The Cincinnati Post* of October 30 suggested more specific method of involvement. It believed that South Koreans were highly literate, industrious and mature. They had earned and deserve the rights to elect their own leaders and to publish and speak their minds. Since the civilian acting government under Choi Gyu-hah was not able to control military forces, the U.S. should urge the army chiefs of South Korea to more gradually toward democracy. It could avoid any unnecessary criticism according to the editorial.

*The Atlanta Constitution* on October 29 warned Washington that the U.S. foreign policy needed to be reexamined with the event in South Korea. Washington's Cold War policy failed in the Third World. Iran and Nicaragua were the good examples according to the editorial. The U.S. lacked 'plan B' when something went wrong. This kind of mistake should not be repeated in South Korea. Although this newspaper did not provide specific tool on what Washington should do in South Korea at this point, but indirectly insisted that the diplomatic action of Washington would be the measurement for the capabilities and capacities of the Central Intelligence Agency and foreign policy makers of the U.S.

*The State of Columbia*, South Carolina on October 30 praised the achievement of South Korea during the Park's administration. It stated that South Korea would achieve even greater stature if democratization succeeded. America needed to recognize the tactical and strategic value of the peninsula and its people hope for the best. For that Washington should prepare to extend a helping hand.

*Casper Star-Tribune* of Wyoming also pointed out the importance of South Korea for the U.S. foreign policy in Asia. According to the editorial, American policy demonstrated that Third World nations could benefit by joining with the West rather than the Communists. Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea were good examples. That was why the U.S. should provide arms and bondage to South Korea at the time of crisis. (*Casper Star-Tribune*, Nov. 5) Supporting democratization of South Korea was one way to secure alliance with South Korea in the future.

On the other hand, *The Daily Oklahoman* on October 31 and *Tulsa World* on October 29 pointed out that Washington should not be involved in internal situation of South Korea because South Korea was not like America. Both newspapers insisted that the U.S. should not pressure South Korea to adopt American or Western style democracy and human rights. They instead emphasized the importance of American military presence in South Korea as it mentioned previously. They criticized the Carter's plan to withdraw American troops from the region and the death of Park proved that Carter's plan

was wrong. They were expressing the importance of maintaining the Cold War diplomacy.

Meanwhile some newspapers hesitated to express the danger of Washington's direct involvement in South Korea's internal affairs while emphasizing the importance of the country to the U.S. *Detroit Free Press* specified that the immediate goal of American foreign policy was to prevent outside forces—North Korea and the Soviet Union—from exploiting the potential instability of South Korea. The long-term goal was to encourage the creation of a successor regime that would be able to maintain stability in the Korean peninsula and yet be more dedicatedly democratic than the Park regime. It pointed out that Washington's ability to shape that prospect seemed relatively modest. Strong intervention would run the risk of even greater instability because it might require military involvement. This was why the Carter administration had a great reason for caution as it tried to react to and shape events in South Korea. (*Detroit Free Press*, Oct. 30)

*The Evening Bulletin* of New York pointed out that acting President Choi had no political or Army support. It indicated that there is no single responsible person that Washington could pressure to adopt more liberal measures. The best thing that could come out was for a strong democratic leader to be chosen who would continue South Korea's brilliant economic progress while restoring civil liberties to its people. What Washington could do was to hope that was not too much to ask. (*The Evening Bulletin*, Oct. 29) *St Louis Globe-Democrat* of October 30 also shared similar view. For the sake of world peace, as well as for the sake of the South Korean people, it's to be hoped that the electoral council choose the next president wisely.

On November 1 *Des Moines Tribune* expressed that Washington's involvement in South Korea's internal situation could be dangerous. It insisted that let Choi try to receive support from the people. That would make Choi's administration strong and stabilize the situation. The U.S. should not make mistake again to rely on dictators proved to be vulnerable.

*The News and Courier* of South Carolina also pointed out the importance of the stability and democratization of South Korea after the death of President Park. This incident brought the attention to Americans again to the U.S. treaty obligations in Korea and to potential dangers inherent in fulfilling those obligations. It emphasized that the dangers should not be ignored by Americans preoccupied with such domestic issues such as inflation, recession and energy crunches. (Oct. 31)

While some newspapers took moderate position on whether Washington involved in South Korea's internal situation, some of them insisted strongly for non-involvement. *The Lincoln Star* of Nebraska on October 30 introduced the personal interview with a local Korean in Omaha who disguised with Park Chung-hee's repression. As a conclusion, it stated that for the future of South Korea, let Koreans control their own lives. It believed that Korean people had a capacity to adopt more democratic government.

*Sentinel Star* of Orlando, Florida also stated that the role of the U.S. in Korea was to maintain security. For the internal development, it should be controlled by Koreans

themselves. It warned that the U.S. involvement in South Korean politics at this stage would probably do more harm than good. (*Sentinel Star*, Oct. 30)

*Chicago Tribune* on October 30 also expressed the danger of the U.S. involvement in South Korean internal political development. It pointed out that there was political chaos. The U.S. involvement could face the backfire since Washington had been openly complaining Park's policy. Since the assassin Kim Jae-gyu openly announced that he received American support for his plot, the U.S. could unnecessarily be a part of the conspiracy. At this point, according to this editorial, the best way was to leave Korea alone. The role of the U.S. was to stop possible attack by North Korea and the U.S. had done well.

*Arkansas Gazette* of October 30 also discouraged Washington to involve in South Korea's internal political affairs at this point. Since Fidel Castro of Cuba accused that Washington knew about the assassination before, it could damage the U.S. morally and eventually diplomatically. It pointed out that early U.S. military actions against hostile North Korea was good enough, but surely Washington would not let itself be responsible, in any way, for supporting or opposing the formation of whatever government might merge in Seoul.

On October 29 *The Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, Tennessee stated that there was a limitation for the role of the U.S. in the crisis in South Korea. It insisted that the U.S. should not be interfere internal affairs of South Korea. There were strong demands by South Korean people for democratization already. What America could do was to remain the military tie with South Korea while strengthening economic alliance.

*Buffalo Evening News* of October 30 told that the death of Park was a chance for the democratization in South Korean politics. The U.S. had supported Park's dictatorship because there was little choice. The interests of four major Powers—the U.S., Russia, China and Japan—converged on the strategic Korean peninsula. That was why Washington might have temptation to involve in the internal affairs of South Korea. It indicated that whoever the successor of Park knew he needed American support for security and economic development. Even the Army wanted to maintain the tie with the U.S. That is why the U.S. should not be involved in. It emphasized that without involvement, American interests in South Korea would prevail. Also, there was no need for American involvement because stability of Far East was not threatened after the death of Park. At the same time it would be difficult for South Korea to achieve American Style democracy as a result of the incident.

American public opinions on the issue of whether Washington should involve in the process of creating a new government in South Korea became another showcase of the clash of classical debate in American diplomatic history. One argued that Washington should be a defender of democracy in the World especially at the time of Cold War. On the other hand, the U.S. should maintain the traditional non-involvement policy. The death of Park Chung-hee reignited this tradition again in America. At the peak of Col War conflict, the role of the U.S. and its dilemma prevailed.

South Korea was important strategically and economically to the U.S. in 1970s. The major crisis took place at the end of the decade. Regardless the difficulties, this occasion proved that the South Korean-American relations functioned well. The public opinions in the American newspapers illustrated well what would be the issues that needed to be considered to maintain the cordial relations.

#### 4. Conclusion

The assassination of South Korea's President Park Chung-hee was one of the most shocking incidents in the history of the Republic of Korea. Death of Park itself was the shocking news and it was more shocking that he was killed by the head of KCIA. The closest ally, the U.S. also shocked by the news and Washington deployed early warning aircraft with naval task forces to the Sea of Korea to secure South Korea from possible attack by North Korea.

Lately, South Korea and the United States developed diplomatic difficulties as President Carter demanded the guarantee of human rights and democracy to autocratic government of Park Chung-hee. Also, Jimmy Carter since the Presidential candidate of Democratic Party adopted a policy to withdraw American troops in South Korea. The sudden death of Park brought these issues into the surface again.

American newspapers reacted to the incident in South Korea and they became good sources to understand the American public opinion about the U.S. policy toward South Korea. Early reaction of Washington especially military actions was mostly welcomed by the newspapers. Almost all newspapers agreed that the U.S. action was proper and well managed. They expressed that the U.S. action made not only South Korea but East Asia stable at the time of the major crisis. There was no single editorial that directly opposed this decision of Washington. They believed that it successfully stop the possible attack on South Korea by Kim Il-song's North.

About the future role of Washington in South Korea, opinions were divided. Some urged Washington to involve in South Korean internal affairs to set up more democratic government while some opposed the involvement. Some of the newspapers took somewhat moderate position. American public opinions reflected through the newspapers on this issue reflected the American dilemma well. The trends of public opinion were similar to the dilemma of the Carter administration's policy makers. The dilemma was what Washington needed to do as the leader of 'free World' at the time of Cold war while maintaining the traditional non-involvement policy of America.

This study clearly demonstrates that the diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and the U.S. was working well at the time of crisis in general. Situation changed, but even today, the U.S. remains as the most important ally of the South Korea. The study provides

some evidence for how the diplomatic relations between these two countries will work in the future. At the same time, it suggests that what Washington needs to do in the World when similar incident taking place.

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