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Korea on the Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979–1980

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India increasingly vulnerable. He therefore argues for a nuclear force that relies upon mobility to ensure its survivability.

The final section of Menon’s book is a thorough discussion of the nuclear options open to India. He recommends that India adopt a rail-garrison, land-based missile force until it can shift to reliance upon ballistic missile-carrying submarines by 2020 (a date that seems extremely optimistic, given the troubled history of India’s indigenous submarine programs). He also argues that India should field cruise missiles for both conventional and nuclear missions.

Menon is skeptical of the contention that nuclear weapons themselves offer an effective deterrent. He argues that a state’s force posture and command and control arrangements are also important. Menon calls for extensive changes in Indian military decision making, suggesting arrangements that draw heavily upon those of the United States. He believes, for example, that India needs to adopt its own version of the national command authority and Joint Chiefs of Staff to command and control its nuclear forces. He also argues that India needs to codify its targeting policy in its own version of the Single Integrated Operational Plan.

A Nuclear Strategy for India is likely only the first of many efforts to think through the implications of India’s decision to go nuclear. While but a first step, it provides the groundwork upon which others will doubtless build.

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For some reason, Korea is a major blind spot in U.S. thinking about world affairs. Public commemoration of the Korean War’s fiftieth anniversary is almost nonexistent compared to the attention paid to the Second World War in the first half of the 1990s. Today, the Cold War lingers on in East Asia with the continuing division of the peninsula, which remains one of the locations in which the United States is most likely to go to war in the immediate future. Yet the American interaction with Korea is in many ways a success story in U.S. foreign policy, at least in the southern half of the country. The Republic of Korea has become an industrial, market-driven economy with a civilian-led democratic government that enjoys grassroots support among its citizenry. The road to this state, however, was fraught with extreme danger. From the mid-1960s until the early 1980s, there was a nearly continuous real possibility of war on the peninsula again. One of the periods of maximum danger was between 1979 and 1981, in the wake of the assassination of President Park Chung-hee and a military coup that toppled the civilian successor government.

General John A. Wickham was the commander of U.S. forces in Korea during this period, and this book is a memoir of his efforts to keep the United States and South Korea focused on their combat missions despite the turmoil of the time. Even though Wickham was a military commander, he could not turn a blind eye to politics. The South Korean army had become thoroughly politicized after

Park's eighteen-year reign. The late president had been a general who had come to power by a military coup. Many of his protégés worried about their futures after their mentor's death. There was also a good deal of concern and confusion about the North Korean role and its likely reaction to the assassination. Initially the South Korean military supported the constitutional process, but a number of junior generals with conservative social views and a strong distrust of civilian politicians decided to take control of the government two months after Park's death on 12 December (thus "12/12"). Wickham recommended a hands-off approach toward the coup. If it turned violent, or if there were a countercoup, there would be a good possibility that the North would intervene. The general knew this advice would not be popular back in Washington with President Jimmy Carter and his foreign policy team. "The U.S. government obviously was out of sorts over the '12/12 Incident.' It was a setback to the democratization process in the ROK [Republic of Korea] and a poor harbinger for the human rights goals that were central to President Carter's foreign policy."

Wickham's efforts were constantly focused on trying to keep the South Korean army "facing north"—that is, preparing to deal with the military threat of North Korea. This ever-present danger made the political maneuverings of coup and countercoup leaders all the more dangerous. The possibility that the North might attack in an effort to take advantage of the political weakness of the South was one that intelligence indicated was real. Indeed, the story Wickham tells evokes images of Saigon in the mid-1960s.

In Wickham's view, many of the generals he dealt with were politicians in uniform.

He was drawn into a number of political matters against his wishes; one of them almost destroyed his career. One of Wickham's themes is the influence the United States had in South Korea. The United States had reduced its ground force numbers in Korea during the administration of Richard Nixon, and the efforts of Carter to withdraw the troops entirely made many Koreans question the U.S. commitment. "The American mission was over a barrel, because our basic objective was to protect the ROK from invasion. That left us obliged to accept the realities of the Korean political apparatus, with all of its warts, and to work with it as best we could."

This memoir is rich with information. Although Wickham at times overstates the limits of U.S. influence, his basic point is correct: Koreans, not Americans, were going to decide the fate of Korea. It is also clear that cultural misperception complicated relations. General Chun Doo-hwan, the leader of the coup, failed to recognize that civil-military relations in the United States were different from those in Korea and therefore incorrectly assumed that Wickham played a role in formulation of policy.

Overall, the United States was fortunate to have as talented an individual as Wickham in place during this difficult time. Officers assigned to Korea or to any position abroad where they must deal with matters that involve factors that transcend those of an operational or tactical nature can profit from this book.

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