MEMORANDUM

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August 18, 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR: BRENT SCOWCROFT

FROM: Jeanne W. Davis

SUBJECT: Minutes of WSAG Meeting August 18, 1976

Attached are the minutes of the Washington Special Actions Group meeting held August 18, 1976 to discuss Korea.

Attachment

cc: William G. Hyland
    William Gleysteen
    Col. Clint Granger

DECLASSIFIED - E.O. 12356. Sec. 3.4
with portions exempted
E.O. 12356, Sec. 1.9 (c) (7)

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By KSH, NARA, Date 6/2/95

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WASHINGTON | SPECIAL ACTIONS GROUP MEETING

August 18, 1976

Time and Place: 3:47 pm - White House Situation Room

Subject: Korea

Participants:

Chairman: Henry A. Kissinger

State:
Charles Robinson
Philip Habib

Defense:
William Clements
Morton Abramowitz

JCS:
Admiral James L. Holloway
Lt. Gen. William Y. Smith

CIA:

NSC:
William G. Hyland
William Gleysteen
Michael Hornblow

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Secretary Kissinger: There is a practical problem I would like to point out. The attack occurred at 9:43 last night and I was not notified until 9:00 this morning.

Mr. Habib: That was poor performance on our part and we will take the blame.

Mr. Clements: There is no reason for CIA to take the blame - why not DOD and State who also received messages in these channels.

Mr. Habib: The information came in at midnight last night but I did not learn about it till this morning.

Secretary Kissinger: It was in my take this morning along with some fifty other cables.

Mr. Habib: It was 8:30 this morning when I first knew about it.

Mr. Abramowitz: ISA did not learn about it until 9:30 this morning.

Mr. Habib: There was discussion between the operation centers but nobody alerted the principals.

Secretary Kissinger: Wasn't there another incident where this sort of thing happened recently? Of course, there was the Mayaguez.

Mr. Habib: We should of been informed at 12:01 am. The machinery did not work properly.

Mr. Habib: The various operation centers talked with each other but did not send it up to the principals.

Secretary Kissinger: I am not blaming CIA. Each department should be organized to inform its principals. Let's begin the briefing.

(begins briefing. Attached)

Secretary Kissinger: Why don't we see any North Koreans' dead bodics.

Adm. Holloway: Stilwell doesn't believe that there were any North Korean casualties.

Mr. Robinson: Did the North Koreans report on the incident?

Yes, but there was not mention of casualties.

continues and finishes briefing).

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Secretary Kissinger: What does the South have in terms of manpower?

They have 523,000 men in their army, 280 jet fighters, 175 patrol craft and no submarines. In our judgment a military action by the North to be effective would have to be a surprise attack. We, therefore, do not believe that the North had a major attack in mind.

Secretary Kissinger: Can somebody provide me with an analysis of how the two sides balance forces?

Admiral Holloway: The North Korean ground forces have good hitting power, but the South Korean army is well lead and backed by the U.S. The North Korean air force is larger, but the South Koreans are better trained. There is also the confidence factor. The South Koreans are confident because the U.S. backs them up. The North Korean submarines are not worth very much. Each country has a military force which is well designed to support its own strategy and position. In my judgment, it is a military stand-off. I do not think that at the present time that the North Koreans could mount an effective military invasion.
Kissinger: why was the reaction force so late in getting into the area?

Holloway: Stillwell has avoided answering that.

Kissinger: do you mention the photo coverage, why was it necessary to prune that tree?

Holloway: it obstructed the line of view between the observation post and the tower. On this chart I can only find one of the two positions cited.

Clements: wasn't that a routing operation - keeping the area clear?

Kissinger: This cable which was just handed to me makes it sound as though there was a lot of backing and forthing about this.

Byland: They told us not to do it. (The North Koreans)

Holloway: Stillwell's report says that the original plan was to cut the tree down but the North Koreans said no. He then decided to prune it. An eyewitness account says that when the North Korean officer arrived on the scene he asked what they were doing. He was told "pruning" and answered "good."

Habib: There are some differences in the reporting of that.

Kissinger: why do the North Koreans have the right to object to our cutting down or pruning a tree?

Habib: The whole area is a joint area.

Kissinger: if the North Koreans decide to prune a tree do they ask our permission.

Habib: no, we don't care. Each side has its own area within the joint area.

Kissinger: Can each side order the other side around?

Habib: They can't force each other but there is a lot of argumentation.

Kissinger: Well there are two problems as I see it. First the first problem is that two American officers have been beaten to death. The second problem is to review the procedures we are following in the LAC. Now regarding the first issue I agree with the CIA analysis, my impression is that it was a premeditated attack. There were some fifty other things they could have done to stop us from pruning the tree.

Now this letter Stillwell wants to send to Kim. Why should he send a letter to Kim? What standing does he have?

Habib: Well Stillwell is the Commander of the US Forces and Kim is the Commander of the North Korean Army. He also signed the original peace agreement.

Kissinger: There have already been White House and State Department statements deploiring these murders. Why do we now also need a Stillwell statement. Does he have the authority to make a statement?

Abramowitz: no, he needs Washington approval.
Kissinger: Well let’s put that into abeyance. I have talked to the President today about this. He feels that some sort of strong action is necessary but does not know precisely what it should be. Now there are two things that come to my mind. A few weeks ago we turned off a B-52 exercise because it would be provocative to the Chinese. We might resurrect that exercise. The second possibility would be to alert all forces in Korea.

Holloway: We could go from DEFCON 4 to DEFCON 3.

Kissinger: What would that do?

Holloway: Unless we had a specific plan in mind or the North Koreans felt we had a specific plan in mind they probably would not react at all.

Kissinger: Well on that basis you could not threaten anything.

Abromovits: Stillwell recommends we finish pruning the tree.

Clements: I am in complete accord with that and think we should cut the God damn thing down.

Kissinger: I am in favor of that too but I don’t think we should do anything until after we do something with our forces. What is the meaning of the LCTCC alert stages?

Holloway: 5 is normal and 1 is war. Stage 2 means the war is inevitable and stage 1 is when the shooting starts.

If the alert was moved up to 3 how would the media and the US people react to that in this campaign year.

Kissinger: That has nothing to do with it. The important thing is that they beat two Americans to death and must pay the price.

The North Koreans are looking for indications that they can create another Vietnam type mentality in this country. Therefore to disabuse them of this it is important to have the right kinds of expressions of support from the media and opinion makers.

Kissinger: What about resurrecting the B-52 exercise? The State Department hereby withdraws its objections to it. This is now the best time in the world to run it.

Habib: It was a training exercise.

Abromovits: Would it scare the Americans or the Koreans?

Gleysteen: There is another exercise planned.

Kissinger: But everybody already knows about that one.

Clements: Is it true that in the exercise we would fly the B-52s over Korea and then go back?

Holloway: Yes.

Kissinger: How long would it take?

Smith: We could get it going in 72 hours – possibly less.

Kissinger: The quicker the better.
Mr. Clements: Do we wish to drop live bombs?

Secretary Kissinger: If that is part of the program, do it. If not then don't do it.

Mr. Clements: Well let me play Devil's Advocate. Why not drop live bombs?

Secretary Kissinger: If it is part of the plan do it.

Mr. Clements: I can make it part of the plan.

Mr. Abramowitz: would be well below nightmare range and they were not scheduled to drop live ordinance.

Mr. Habib: Those planes will come within easy range of North Korea. Distances there are close.

Secretary Kissinger: OK. That will be a good lesson for them.

What I would like to do now is to go over possible courses of actions and meet again tomorrow at 8:00 am to discuss them. The President wants to explore the possibility of taking one military step. What can we do? You may wish to think about it over night. Whatever we do must be commensurate.

Adm. Holloway: There are several possibilities, we could lay mines, we could seize a North Korean flag vessel or a fishing boat. But seizing a fishing boat might be beneath our dignity. The North Koreans have 34 commercial flag vessels. None of them are in our ports or allied ports. We have only been able to locate 9 of them so the remainder are probably in North Korean waters.

There is also the possibility of a combined with the South Korean's. It would take a minimum of four days to set this up. We could also send in a carrier task group. The Midway could be there between 48-72 hours. It is in Yakuska now. They could have a missile-shoot off the coast.

Secretary Kissinger: I like the idea of cutting the tree down. We should generate our forces first and then cut it down. We should also go on a higher alert. Let's put our forces on defcon 3 tonight and get a plan for cutting down the tree from Stillwell. (to Adm. Holloway) Can you start gearing up the B-52 run?

Adm. Holloway: Yes.
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Secretary Kissinger: We need to know what forces Stilwell needs to cut the tree down?

Adm. Holloway: There are two difficult decisions before us.
1) At what point do we stop putting in reinforcements. In the past when we have moved in men they have acted reciprocally and vice versa. At what point would we stop. The next question is the use of firearms.
In this recent incident both sides with firearms that were not used.

[Signatures]
Kissinger: If I had known one of those men was going to be killed, I would have used a firearm.

Habib: They were attacked from behind and had no chance.

Holloway: Most of these men are Vietnam veterans. They were taught there to die before violating the rules of engagement.

Habib: Stillwell knows the estimated forces and that we can't move men without violating the agreements. If there was a flight there could be a need for reinforcements from outside of the zone.

Hyland: Should we reinforce that company?

Habib: The core is the main force in the zone. Stillwell will have to tell us what he will do.

Kissinger: We consult with the South Koreans.

Habib: Stillwell

Hyland: We need to send a message to Stillwell to tell him not to go ahead with the letter and to prepare a plan for cutting down the tree.

Habib: The troops could be prepositioned and he could bring them up the road and have them move in as he requires them.

Kissinger: It will be useful for us to generate enough activity so that the North Koreans begin to wonder what those crazy American bastards are doing or are capable of doing in this election year.

Abromowitz: We should consider putting more US forces into the area.

Kissinger: That might be desirable.

Habib: There is also the question of the Northwest Islands. They are highly vulnerable.

Kissinger: Now about our forces. Should they go on alert tonight? We should also get that training exercise laid on. I would like for tomorrow morning to have a list of US forces which could be moved into Korea. We should consider moving F-111 and F-4s in. Then on Friday morning we can move to cut that tree.

Perhaps we should decide now to move the F-4s and decide on the F-111s tomorrow.

Smith: We can do it from scratch in twelve hours.

Habib: We have to consult with the Japanese.

Kissinger: Well then do it. Get the process started.

Abromowitz: To temporarily move our aircraft does not require us to consult with the Japanese.

Habib: We do have to advise them.

Kissinger: I would like to get a working group started. Shall I set one up?

Habib: Yes - we will need representatives from State, Defense, JCS and the CIA.

Kissinger: Who will inform Paris?
...: I think the Charge and Stillwell should go jointly.

Cleistine: A lot of this will soon become public knowledge.

Kissinger: Yes, we have to decide on press guidance. It should be low key. We can admit to going onto UNCEC. I am because of the premeditated murders.

Clements: So we have to notify the UN.

Nabil: No, we have gone to UNCEC. I before without notifying them...

Stillwell: Stillwell & I take his orders from the JCS not the UN.

Nabil: I think there is a procedure for the JCS to inform the UN.

Kissinger: For tomorrow's meeting there should be a chart prepared of what everybody has to do.

Acheson: What about the War powers Act?

Kissinger: That is a valid point. There should be one central person for consulting with Congress.

Hallowey: We will look at it. I have it right here.

Nabil: Your lawyers and our lawyers can study it.

Kissinger: By early this evening we should have
1. That we want to do about the War powers Act
2. Press guidance - "We are taking these precautionary moves because of the premeditated murder of American soldiers which raised the question of what the North Koreans might be up to.
3. Consultations with South Korea, Japan and the UN.

Acheson: What about the North Korean allies?

Kissinger: I am seeing the Chinese at 5:00.

Nabil: The North Koreans have already come out with their version of the story. They have not agreed to a meeting tonight. Eventually they must come to a meeting.

Stillwell: The proposed statement is not very strong.

Nabil: Stillwell must be told not to submit a letter at the meeting.

Kissinger: For the 5:00 meeting tomorrow I want a spreadsheet. We should also alert the task force to the possibility they may need to move tomorrow. We can concentrate on seven things.

1. Additional military deployments to Korea
2. Possible diplomatic actions, i.e., we should notify and brief.
3. What military action we might take
4. Congressional activity

The meeting ended at 4:43pm