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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
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DATE 01 MAR 2016
FOIA CASE # 04-F-2690

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

SUBJECT: Habib Mission to Korea

I am told that the President decided at last Friday's foreign policy breakfast to dispatch Phil Habib to Seoul later this week to attempt to arrange a trilateral meeting between the President and representatives from North (Kim?) and South Korea (Park?) during his trip to South Korea in late June. I believe this is a lousy idea. Substantively it is a loser. The timing is atrocious. Procedurally, embarking on an initiative of this kind before there has been any serious interagency discussion of the PRM makes a mockery of the Administration's policy-making process.

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I would urge you to reclamation the decision at this point, since I am unclear as to who originated the idea, and I do not understand what we expect to accomplish. I do believe, however, that an attempt to press for US-ROK-DPRK meeting in conjunction with the President's trip is flawed in these respects:

(1) It elevates form over substance. If we are going to actively inject ourselves into North-South political discussions, we should first have a clear idea of our objectives and a strategy for achieving them. We have neither. This Administration, as well as its predecessors, has been so mesmerized by questions relating to the venue and format of Korean talks that no serious effort has been undertaken to analyze the issues that would arise in negotiations or to define the proposals we would put forward. Without that prior analytic effort -- and this is not a strong feature of the PRM -- this kind of short-fuse initiative is a sham -- little more than a gimmick designed to hype the visit with a diplomatic spectacular for which we are ill-prepared.

(2) It concentrates on the initiation of discussions at the expense of creating inducements for both Pyongyang and Seoul to approach North-South discussions seriously. The basic problem goes back to our troop withdrawal policy. Diplomatically, unconditional withdrawals send the wrong signal both to Seoul and Pyongyang. The ROKG is nervous about entering serious discussions with the North when it is uncertain of the backing we will provide. As for the North, if we are going to withdraw forces without requiring a quid pro quo, they have no compelling incentive to enter a substantive dialogue with the South to facilitate our withdrawal. Until we sort out where we are going with respect to our future withdrawal plans, it is premature to put forward dramatic diplomatic initiatives.

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(3) This proposal forfeits an opportunity to press the Chinese into a more active and constructive diplomatic role on the peninsula. Back in 1975 Kissinger proposed a Korean political conference involving those countries "most directly concerned," i.e., the US, China, and the two Koreas. The Chinese have displayed little enthusiasm for participating in such a conference, no doubt reflecting the North's position. But that is no reason to let them off the hook. Indeed one of the purposes of normalization was to engage the Chinese more deeply in parallel efforts to stabilize the status quo in Asia. The concept of the trilateral talks on Korea puts them on the sidelines, free to concentrate on their rivalry with the Russians for influence in Pyongyang while leaving to us the maintenance of stability.

(4) Park will not go along. There is little in such a meeting for him unless we are prepared to terminate troop withdrawals and/or help him forge economic ties with the PRC. The South has never liked the idea of trilateral talks since they fear such talks would merely serve as a "cover" for direct contacts between Washington and Pyongyang, legitimizing the North's pretenses to special status, while relegating Seoul to a secondary role in discussions. Moreover, the timing of this initiative will appear curious to Park inasmuch as recent ROKG efforts to lure the North into serious discussions proved abortive. Kim Il-sung is still unwilling to deal with Park as an equal. And in hosting the international ping-pong championship, the North completely excluded Seoul from the competition. Thus it is difficult to maintain that it is an opportune time to probe North Korean intentions.

(5) Nor would this proposal serve wider diplomatic purposes. The Japanese will likely find it strange if we embark on a proposal of such far-reaching significance without having conveyed a hint of such an idea during Ohira's recent trip to Washington. Beyond this, rumors of new US departures toward North Korea tend to stimulate ill-conceived GOJ initiatives designed simply to assure that Japan does not fall behind the US in normalizing relations with any Asian communist country.

(6) Thus most Asians -- and I suspect most serious US journalists -- will regard an effort to get a "trialogue" going at the summit as a gimmick. We should approach this trip as a demonstration of American steadiness, balance, and staying power in Northeast Asia. A dramatic gesture of this kind -- aimed essentially at the North -- will work directly at cross purposes with these aims.

-- In short, this idea has little chance of success. Proposing it will generate doubts about our judgment and steadiness in both Seoul and Tokyo. It will not serve our wider purposes at this time. We are ill-prepared to follow up on it effectively in the unlikely event it is accepted by both Koreas. It is gimmicky. There is no discernible strategy. By pushing this now, we may forfeit promising opportunities which could arise once we have clarified to ourselves and to our friends in the area adjustments we may have in mind for future troop withdrawals.

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What is to be done?

First, I suggest that you call Zbig and find out precisely what it is that the White House people think can be accomplished through this initiative at this time. I have an uneasy suspicion that the PR people in the White House may have ginned up this idea as a TV spectacular for the Summit. Korea is not, however, a promising locale for a mini-Camp David if that is what they have in mind.

Second, if it is impossible to turn off this idea, then I suggest that you urge that Phil's mandate be cast in the broadest possible terms. If he must go, then his task should be simply to carry out the substantive advance work for the Summit, and he should be prepared to discuss all the major issues on the agenda, i.e., troop withdrawals, diplomatic initiatives, economic cooperation, and human rights. Since the PRC meeting on Korea is not scheduled until June 7th, I would suggest either that Phil's trip be delayed or the PRC meeting be moved up.

Third, if Zbig is determined to have Phil focus principally on this initiative, I suggest that you point out in the strongest terms that such an effort would be feckless and counter-productive unless we previously clarify to President Park the nature of prospective adjustments in the troop withdrawal schedule. The adjustment most likely to elicit an accommodating ROKG stance would be "suspension" of the withdrawals pending evident progress toward a reduction of tensions on the peninsula and the development of durable North-South peace arrangements. This would indicate that we are serious and are prepared to use some leverage to make such negotiations succeed.



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Deputy Assistant Secretary

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