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WASHINGTON SPECIAL ACTIONS GROUP

August 19, 1976

Time and Place: 8:12 a.m. - 9:15 a.m., White House Situation Room

Subject: Korea

Participants:

Chairman: Secretary Henry A. Kissinger

State: Charles Robinson
Philip Habib

DOD: William Clements
Morton Abramowitz

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

CIA: George Bush
Evelyn Colbert

NSC William G. Hyland
Staff: William Gleysteen
Michael Hornblow

DECISIONS:

1. Seek Presidential approval of a military action to cut down the tree and try to do it in such a way as to avoid confrontation.
2. Seek Presidential approval to start the B-52 exercise. The first such B-52 run should be timed to coincide with the tree cutting.
3. To start moving the Naval Task Force south into either the Sea of Japan or the Yellow Sea.
4. To start moving 18 F-111s from Mountain Home, Idaho.
5. To develop a contingency plan for hitting the North Korean barracks near the JSA.

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Secretary Kissinger: I would like some account of why it took so long for our reaction force to go in.

Adm. Holloway: We have not received an account which satisfies us. Stilwell was in Japan when the incident took place and is investigating.

Secretary Kissinger: I complained to the Chinese yesterday. They asked a good question. They wanted to know why we had cameras there if we were not expecting an incident?

Adm. Holloway: It was a precaution because of previous incidents.

Secretary Kissinger: Okay. Their next question was -- if we had a photographer there, why didn't we do something?

Adm. Holloway: We have not received a satisfactory answer from Stilwell on that.

Secretary Kissinger: Why did Stilwell go into see Park alone when he was specifically instructed to go in with the DCM?

Mr. Abramowitz: Well he called Stern and Stern said for him to go ahead.

Secretary Kissinger: But did he tell Stern that Stern was supposed to accompany him?

Mr. Abramowitz: He felt that Park was supposed to be informed right away. That was the environment.

Secretary Kissinger: We are not going to let Stilwell run loose. We are not going to let him act like MacArthur. We could have cut him out completely and insured that the whole thing be handled by the DCM.

Adm. Holloway: He talked to the Minister of Defense, then ---

Secretary Kissinger: It should not happen again.

Mr. Clements: I will send him a message.

Secretary Kissinger: I heard on the radio this morning a report that the Pentagon says that military action is inconceivable. The President

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will hit the ceiling when he hears that because I told him we would be discussing possible military actions and that is what the President wants.

Adm. Holloway: It must have been press conjecture.

Mr. Clements: It was probably from our PA.

Secretary Kissinger: George, do you have a briefing?

Mr. Bush: (Begins briefing -- see attached.)

Secretary Kissinger: We must brief our NATO allies.

Mr. Bush(continues briefing.)

Mr. Habib: Neutral observers (referring to NNSC members at Panmunjom) won't go.

Mr. Bush (finishes briefing.)

Secretary Kissinger: The fact is that they beat two of our men to death. Let's not lose sight of that.

Mr. Clements: Yesterday Henry asked a question about the order of battle. Holloway's judgement was that they are relatively in balance. Is that also your judgement, George?

Mr. Bush: Evelyn?

Mrs. Colbert: Yes, we basically agree. Our ground forces don't count for much. There is a lack of firepower.

Secretary Kissinger: How come 40,000 Americans don't count for much?

Mr. Habib: They consist of one division. The rest are air and ground support.

Adm. Holloway: Our air and mobile forces count for more than is reflected in the numbers. They have great influence.

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Secretary Kissinger: I am uneasy about these net assessments. You can look at military history. Wars are often won by the side with the smaller forces. You look at World War I where the Germans were outnumbered. Then again in World War II, the Germans were outnumbered by the French and British. They were able to concentrate their forces at decisive key points and win.

Mr. Habib: Our battle plan for Korea is based on exactly that assumption.

Adm. Holloway: On balance the South Korean forces with US assistance are adequate to stop the North Koreans from reaching Seoul. However a surprise attack could upset that. But that is no longer a possibility since we have gone to DEFCON 3. Of course a lot depends on how the troops fight for there can be breakthroughs. One breakthrough can raise havoc. A bold stroke could cause a lot of trouble. But the North Koreans by their attack on the two men have given away the element of surprise.

Secretary Kissinger: If they had wanted to launch an attack they would not have beat the two Americans to death.

Mr. Hyland: It is obvious from their propaganda that the Chinese were cool to the North Korean August 5 statement. If the North Koreans really want to fight they will need Chinese and Russian support.

Secretary Kissinger: If we do nothing they will think of us as the paper tigers of Saigon. They might then try to create a series of events. If we do nothing there may be another incident and then another.

Mr. Hyland: There is a substantial body of opinion in the US that we should pull out of Korea. Ed Reichauer in the Christian Science Monitor wrote that we should not honor our commitment even if attacked.

Mr. Robinson: When was this article?


Mr. Hyland: About three weeks ago. There may be a problem if the North Koreans think that this crisis will cause controversy in this country.

Secretary Kissinger: Certainly there will be controversy. There would be a controversy if we did nothing. The only way to act is to do something effectively.

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Mr. Bush: 

Secretary Kissinger: What kind of alert did they have for the EC-121?

Mr. Bush: There was no such strip alert at that time.

Mrs. Colbert: It was intended to demonstrate to the US a high degree of readiness and to give us pause from undertaking military action. They laid everything on before publicizing their alert.

Secretary Kissinger: You still think that yesterday's incident was a planned action?

Mrs. Colbert: Yes. The way they handled the alert was another indication that it was planned. Within one hour of our going on DEFCON 3 they had their strip alert.

Secretary Kissinger: You do think it was planned.

Mrs. Colbert: An incident was planned but the actual killing of the two Americans may not have been in the plan. Those guards have been indoctrinated to hate Americans. The Koreans are very violent. The weight of the evidence including the number of Korean reinforcements ready prior to the incident indicates that our interpretation is true.

Secretary Kissinger: Obviously the tree was going to be a contentious issue and it was probably clear to the North Koreans that our going-in was likely to create an incident. So why didn't we also anticipate this. Where was our reaction force? We had no authority to prune the tree. We went in, advised the North Korean Officer who said good and then all hell broke loose.

Mr. Clements: Well, I agree. I remember our discussion yesterday and what you (to Holloway) said about our troops being Vietnam veterans trained to obey the rules. But they were armed and I can't understand how they could have let the Koreans get that close to them and get themselves clobbered and chopped up.

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Secretary Kissinger: What military options do we have?

Adm. Holloway: Stilwell was in Japan during the incident and still does not understand what happened. It was a surprise to him. One thing he did point out on the telephone is that once the two officers were killed the troops were leaderless.

Secretary Kissinger: What about the guy in the observation tower.

Adm. Holloway: Our information on that is garbled. There is no reasonable excuse. Since yesterday's meeting we have gone up to DEFCON 3 and our F-4s arrived in Korea before nightfall. The North Koreans are aware of it because they complained about it at the MAC meeting.

Secretary Kissinger: Why?

Mr. Habib: Technically speaking any introduction of forces into Korea is illegal. We have done this thousands of times and the North Koreans have always complained. They do it too. The introduction of any weapons not there at the time of the agreement is illegal.

Secretary Kissinger: What are we going to do?

Adm. Holloway: The first priority is to prune or cut the tree. The preliminary plan is to move in with some forces and chop it down quickly.

Secretary Kissinger: Does the Army have highly trained tree choppers?

Adm. Holloway: It would be done by specially trained Army engineers. The second option mentioned by Stilwell would be to announce to the press and observers and the North Koreans that we were going in to cut down the tree. Stilwell says this would be okay politically but might cause some military problems.

Secretary Kissinger: I respect Stilwell's military judgements but politics is not his forte. Can you imagine inviting the world press to a tree cutting. We would be a laughing stock. It would be theatrical. The thing is to do it and then get out. The press could be invited in to look at the stump.

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Adm. Holloway: The plan as we know it is not entirely adequate. They are getting it to us.

Mr. Clements: This business of sending in a squad is nonsense. It will just lead to a confrontation and may get a bunch of others killed. What for? A tree? One guy with explosives, some plastique, could do the job. He could go in on a bicycle. Why risk a bunch of people for a tree? I don't like it at all. It makes no sense. We should not expect unarmed Americans to go in there and get killed over a tree.

Secretary Kissinger: The basic point is that we know we have the right to cut down the tree. They have killed two Americans and if we do nothing they will do it again. We have to do something.

Adm. Holloway: The Chiefs are looking at the tree as a military action and looking to see if we have the force to back it up. One option we are looking at is to have the SR-71 penetrate North Korean air space for reconnaissance purposes and advertise this to the world. Nobody would get hurt if we did this.

Secretary Kissinger: Why advertise?

Adm. Holloway: Advertising would tend to embarrass them.

Secretary Kissinger: Advertising would get us involved in a UN debate.

Adm. Holloway: We can advertise or not advertise it. With regard to the B-52 training flights they will proceed from Guam to South Korea and approach to within 43 miles of the DMZ. They will drop radar bombs and return. One option would be to use live conventional ordnance and bring them closer to the DMZ. We could also adjust the profile of B-52s so that North Korean radar can detect them.

Mr. Hyland: How many aircraft?

Adm. Holloway: There would be two to three aircraft per cell. They could have a live load of bombs.

Secretary Kissinger: There is not much point in having a live load unless it was always part of the plan.

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Gen. Smith: No, it wasn't.

Secretary Kissinger: Then let's just do it. It is better to talk less and do more.

Adm. Holloway: Is that an execute order?

Secretary Kissinger: Let me check it out with Kansas City. What else can we do?

Adm. Holloway: This show of force in our air operations would not be too impressive to the North Koreans. We could reinforce our ground forces in Korea. The Marines on Okinawa could get there in five days. Or we could keep them afloat. We could fly the Marines from Okinawa in C-130s but a couple of batallions of Marines might not make much difference. We could also send in a Ranger batallion. That could be done in five days. They can do unconventional warfare tasks. But I am not sure we can get the attention of the North Koreans by these kinds of moves.

Secretary Kissinger: Well they have seen us do it twice.

Adm. Holloway: We could use a guided weapon such as an Honest John against a pinpointed target. But the Army can't guarantee its accuracy. We could use artillery to hit some of their observers but the trouble with that is they could come back and do the same thing.

Another option is to prevail upon the South Koreans to reinforce the off-shore islands. The North Koreans would regard that as a very provocative act.

We can move our Naval forces into the Yellow Sea. That would be a high visibility move for until now we have restricted ourselves from the Yellow Sea. We could be there in five days.

Secretary Kissinger: Before we chop the tree down, and we have to do it tonight, can we get one B-52 cell there which they can see before the tree is chopped down?

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Adm. Holloway: Yes. The B-52s could be evident first thing in the morning Korean time.

Gen. Smith: They can be there in 7-8 hours.

Adm. Holloway: We could hit the DMZ or North Korean targets by air or a power plant. But this is not practicable in view of the North Koreans' high state of alert. We could hit the tree with a laser bomb.

Secretary Kissinger: Isn't there anything along the DMZ that we can hit?

Adm. Holloway: There are some observation posts. But it would be better to use artillery rather than aircraft. If we go into North Korean airspace we are violating their territorial sovereignty and it would make our airbase a target.

Secretary Kissinger: The logical thing to do is to hit the base from which the killers of the Americans came from.

Mr. Abramowitz: That could be done with artillery.

Adm. Holloway: Yes. With aircraft you have to take massive defensive measures but artillery is discrete.

Secretary Kissinger: Are the barracks reachable with artillery?

Mr. Abramowitz: Possibly only by South Korean artillery.

Mr. Habib: They can be hit with American artillery.

Secretary Kissinger: But will we know exactly what is being hit? Can we know exactly what is going to happen?

Adm. Holloway: We can come back with a plan.

Secretary Kissinger: It seems to me that the most logical thing is to hit the barracks. There would then be a high probability of getting the people who did this.

Mr. Clements: We all agree that taking out that tree is a must. But we should also do these other things. We have to get that task force moving

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and do the B-52s. But what I would like to do is to have a party land up that coast and blow the hell out of an industrial site. It could be done [REDACTED]

Adm. Holloway: It could be a "seal" operation. We would need to have 24 hours and two selected targets. They could go in on a rubber boat. There would be a high risk of success.

Secretary Kissinger: What does that mean - a high probability of success?

Adm. Holloway: It could be dangerous as hell. If we pick a target which is significant in their view we would have a 50% chance of doing it without getting some people killed. The North Koreans are in a high state of alert.

Mr. Clements: What do you think, Henry?

Secretary Kissinger: I am a bit leary of getting Americans captured that far up the coast. We have to make it clear that we will not be pushed around and that we are not afraid of the North Koreans. If we let this incident go then there will be other incidents. Ideally we should do something quickly and then generate our forces afterwards. I remember with the EC-121 incident that by the time we had identified our targets, and had meetings and moved the carriers -- it was too late.

Mr. Bush: If we try to take that tree down probably that same group of North Koreans as before will come out.

Secretary Kissinger: If we shell the barracks maybe we don't need to take the tree down.

Mr. Habib: The barracks are outside of the Joint Security Area. They have reaction forces outside of the JSA. We are only talking about two miles.

Mr. Clements: I don't like the idea of shelling the barracks. It could start something. What do we do after we shell them? The North Koreans would certainly react violently. I think we should go up the coast.

Adm. Holloway: If we did that, we might have difficulty getting the guys out.

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Secretary Kissinger: Why should that operation be with frogmen rather than airplanes? Airplanes would be a lot safer. Also a coastal operation would risk an infinitely more violent North Korean reaction. However the barracks are clearly related to the incident. If we aren't willing to accept some risk then we should not do anything.

Mr. Clements: I like the other operation better. It could be a harbor and we could blow up a couple of ships. They would be wondering what happened and who did it.

Secretary Kissinger: If we don't take that tree tonight we will have to forget about the tree.

Mr. Bush: They will react.

Mr. Abramowitz: If we send in 35 guys, would they mortar?

Mr. Habib: No, they would either leave us alone or move in 100 people.

Secretary Kissinger: What do I tell the President?

Adm. Holloway: That we are going in to cut down the tree. That our forces will be in position and ready to act depending on what happens. And they will take it from there.

Mr. Hyland: If necessary could we withdraw our forces and then plaster them?

Mr. Clements: Why can't we just send one guy in there?

Secretary Kissinger: The purpose of doing something is to show that we are ready to take risks. The trick is to do something from which they will back off.

Mr. Hyland: Then we will get Stilwell's plan and use all men possible.

Secretary Kissinger: It should be done quickly.

Mr. Hyland: Stilwell will need fairly precise instructions about what happens if a fight starts.

Mr. Habib (explains situation from a map)

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Adm. Holloway: There could be 200-300 people and a guy with a chain saw.

Mr. Abramowitz: The North Koreans probably expect this and are making plans for it.

Secretary Kissinger: One always assumes the unlimited willingness of opponents to take risks. The purpose of this exercise is to overawe them. We are 200 million people and they are 16 million.

Mr. Abramowitz: They could overawe us locally.

Mr. Hyland: If a fight starts we should get our men out and then plaster the area.

Adm. Holloway: We have to cut down the tree before that happens. We can go in with a full batallion.

Secretary Kissinger: We can start the B-52s before.

Adm. Holloway: Yes.

Mr. Clements: We can cut the tree down and plan the B-52 exercise so that they see the B-52s coming. That will give them something to occupy themselves with in Pyongyang. We can cut the tree down while the B-52s are on their way and then keep the B-52s going for a few days.

Secretary Kissinger: How many days.

Adm. Holloway: Five days.

Secretary Kissinger: And make a contingency plan for shelling the barracks.

Mr. Clements: And the Navy task force should move in that direction.

Adm. Holloway: And we can move the F-111s.

Secretary Kissinger: Yes and start the task force moving.

Meeting ended at 9:15 a. m.

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