

## The U.S. Carter Administration and Korea in the 12/12 Incident: Concession of Moral Diplomacy\*

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*The Carter administration knew that the 12/12 incident that occurred in South Korea in 1979 was a coup d'état that would hamper the country's process of democratization. However, it did not take positive action to thwart it. According to the relevant materials, including declassified documents, the Carter administration detected the possibility of a coup d'état in South Korea and de cursory efforts, including informing the South Korean government of such, what it actually implemented on December 12, 1979, and its stance in the period following the incident, was nothing more than passive adaptation to the altered situation. Such an attitude taken by the Carter administration was the result of the domestic factors that were prevalent in Korea at the time, such as the absence of an optional faction due to the inability of the Choi Gyu-ha administration and the fear of a recurrence of a coup d'état, combined with the security-related concerns pertaining to Northeast Asia in the shape of confusion in South Korea and the North's miscalculation. Simultaneously, the Iran hostage crisis in the American Embassy in Iran in the same year also served as a factor that impacted the way the Carter administration responded to the 12/12 incident in South Korea.*

**Keywords:** the 12/12 Incident, the Carter Administration, Chun Doo-hwan, Park Chung-hee, the US hostage crisis in Iran, Korea

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The “12/12 coup d’état” of December 12, 1979 placed Korea, which had finally freed itself from Park Chung-hee’s (Pak Chŏng-hŭi’s) prolonged one-man rule, back into the hands of a military dictatorial rule. Especially as the power of the new army group became the principal agent that suppressed the May 18 Kwangju democratic movement in 1980, the tragedy of modern Korean history began with the 12/12 incident.

However until now, despite that two decades have passed since the end of the 12/12 coup, there has been no definitive end to the controversy concerning the U.S. response. This controversy was heightened because the Carter administration pursued policies that placed a great importance on human rights, integrating “moral value” to its foreign policies (Carter 1977; 1988). In fact, the Carter administration’s foreign policy emphasized moral diplomacy since his inauguration in an attempt to differentiate itself from previous administrations.<sup>1</sup>

There have been two arguments regarding the Carter administration’s response to the 12/12 coup. First is the claim that the United States actively supported the new army group. The foundation of this claim is the so called “hegemonic tradition,” that the U.S. favors realist interests, especially security interests, over moral issues in determining its foreign policies. America’s Korea policy, in line with such considerations, placed most importance on the security of the Korean peninsula, and the Carter administration despite its support for moral diplomacy was not an exception. Accordingly, Shorrock claims that the U.S. was devoted to preventing “complete chaos” on the Korean peninsula and did not focus on who became the internal principal agent (Shorrock 1996). Samsung Lee also states that the U.S. actively cooperated with the new army group to maintain Korean stability. The U.S. was momentarily surprised at the unexpected event, but they soon accepted

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<sup>1</sup> For negative assessments of the Carter administration’s foreign policy see, Hoffmann (1977-78); Kirkpatrick (1981); Spencer (1988); Fontaine (1977); Stoessinger (1985); Kaufman (1993). For positive assessments see, Jones (1988); Hargrove (1988); Rosati (1994).

the new army group and sought a cooperative relationship. Lee explained such attitudes of the U.S. as “asymmetrical dual policy”—choosing to place priority on cooperation with the new army group given the policy choices of pursuing normalized relations with the new army group or insisting on democratic change (Lee 2007: 612-619).

On the other hand, there are arguments claiming that the U.S. was originally against the coup. At the Korean Congressional Special Committee hearing regarding Kwangju, the U.S. claimed that they did not know of the 12/12 incident beforehand, and that they had been concerned about the possible halt in the process of democratization that the U.S. government considered extremely important. The U.S. position was that the Department of State warned of a “serious adverse effect” on U.S.-ROK relations in regard to this incident, and that they had passed on U.S. complaints through various channels. In addition, although the U.S. was aware of their limited influence on Korean domestic politics, they believed that the 12/12 incident did not make democratization of Korea entirely impossible and accordingly, continuously asserted the realization of the democratization schedule to the Choi Kyu Hah administration.<sup>2</sup>

William Gleysteen, then U.S. ambassador to Korea unveiled similar claims in his memoirs. America strongly opposed the 12/12 incident and there were no changes to the belief that a civil government must remain in control. However, he also disclosed that the U.S. took the 5/16 incident as a lesson and did not take the same countermeasures such as unrestrained criticisms or demands of military return (Gleysteen 1999: 77-98). According to Wickham’s memoirs, then-commander of U.S. forces in Korea, he made stronger objections about the military than had Gleysteen (Wickham 1999: 83).

Such testimonies conflict with the research previously introduced. According to previous research, there is a possibility that the U.S. had prior knowledge of the 12/12 incident; after the incident they actively cooperated with the new army group, and in regards to democratization they raised

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<sup>2</sup> “United States Government Statement on the Events in Kwanju, Republic of Korea, in May 1980 (June 19, 1989),” in John A. Wickham, *Korea on the Brink: From the “12/12 Incident” to the Kwangju Uprising, 1979-1980* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1999), pp. 199-201.

questions only to the level of maintaining their dignity. Yet according to statements by personnel, the U.S. did not have prior knowledge of the specifics of the 12/12 incident and after it broke out, they utilized the maximum possible pressure to limit military influence, and made efforts to continue the democratization of Korea. In other words, the U.S. did not acknowledge the new army group nor did they give up their role in the democratization of Korea.

This research will shed light on the contradicting arguments and interpretations by using declassified documents and materials. First, it will reorganize the declassified documents and memoirs to determine whether the U.S. had prior knowledge of the 12/12 incident, and their reaction on the day of the incident. By looking at the Carter administration's level of acknowledgment and the extent of countermeasures, it can be discovered whether the U.S. aided the new military group's rise to power by abetting the 12/12. This research also intends to investigate the U.S. policies after the incident. It will analyze how their policy direction changed and how they operated their Korean policy in the aftermath of the 12/12 incident. It also tries to determine if the U.S. sought solidarity with those in power who were able to effect instant stability, regardless of the characteristics of those agents, rather than questioning the anti-democratic trait of the coup? Or did they place more importance on the democratization of Korea, resulting in pointing out the injustices despite causing possible instability on the Korean peninsula?

This paper will also shed light on historical truths, analyzing the process of American foreign policy and its execution towards Korea. To do this, this paper adopts actor variable as well as the domestic, regional, and global levels of analysis. It attempts to trace the perceptions and attitudes of actors who played a central role in different levels of policy decision-making—Wickham, the Commander of the U.S. Forces in Korea, Gleysteen, U.S. Ambassador to Korea, President Carter, Secretary of State Vance, and Assistant Secretary Holbrooke. Specifically, by analyzing the changes of each actor's perception and policy proposals after the incident, this paper will show how their different perceptions and opinions were adjusted to form the final policy outcomes. Also, based on these analyses it intends to deduct domestic, regional, and international level variables that influenced the actors' perceptions and decisions. In short, this research paper will reconstitute the

situation to determine the Carter administration's Korean policy formation.

## II. DID THE U.S. HAVE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OF THE 12/12 INCIDENT AND WHAT WAS THEIR RESPONSE

The U.S. had relatively accurate prior knowledge of the 12/12 coup, and they reported this to the Korean government. Commander of U.S. Forces in Korea Wickham, revealed that they had contrived relatively accurate information on the possibilities of military “unrest” at the end of November to the beginning of December in 1979. Wickham had heard from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Lee Hyung Geun that there was a possibility of a group of junior level generals with key actors from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graduating classes of the Korea Military Academy who were inciting disorder and rebellion. The reason was their extreme dissatisfaction with the current circumstances and politicians. He was informed that they might attempt to seize power before the presidential election. Wickham notified the Minister of National Defense Roh Jae Hyun (No Chae-hyön) and later the Deputy Commander in Chief Ryu Byung Hyun (Ryu Pyöng-hyön) of this, but Korea regarded this as merely a rumor and did not take any measures. Wickham claimed to have also notified Jim Hausman, a political advisor (Wickham 1999: 49-51).

The information that Wickham had obtained was, in the end, valid. He was correct about the primary actors, the justification they claimed, and the motivations of the coup being factions within the military. The question is whether this information was shared with the U.S. Embassy in Korea and reported to Washington. If, as Gleysteen claims, the Embassy and the Commander of U.S. Forces in Korea maintained good relations, they would have shared this information. Also, considering that Wickham informed the political advisor Hausman, we cannot rule out the possibility that he also notified Washington. Also, the period when he obtained the information was the end of November, and considering that he notified Roh Jae Hyun in December, there was surely enough time for this notification to be made.

Gleysteen also mentioned that U.S. intelligence had knowledge of Chun Doo Hwan's conspiracy. His memoirs reveal that Wickham notified Korea of strange movements centered around the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graduates of the Korea

Military Academy. Also, Gleysteen states that U.S. intelligence sources had knowledge of some kind of conspiracy run by Chun, but was not reported until the day after the 12/12 incident (Gleysteen 1999: 78). In fact, U.S. intelligence admitted to having intelligence on the coup conspiracy. However Gleysteen showed an ambiguous attitude regarding his acknowledgment. He merely claims that he did not come across any “reports” from intelligence, and whether he knew of this information is not mentioned. Also, Gleysteen did not reveal whether the U.S. intelligence reports reached Washington.

Nonetheless, Gleysteen did not have any information on the new army group’s conspiracy until November 29 at the earliest. In a telegram that he sent to Washington on November 29, he did not mention any possibility of a coup, and rated low on the possibility that any general form of a coup might be carried out by the military. It was the end of November to the beginning of December that Wickham acquired information on the movement of factions within the military, centered around the 11<sup>th</sup> class graduates, and thus this information would have been passed onto Gleysteen sometime after that.

The “Weekly Situation Report: Korea” prepared by the U.S. State Department a week before the outbreak of the 12/12 coup does not contain any information regarding the incident. In this report, the Korean military was mentioned only to inform that there was a division of opinion regarding Chung Seung Hwa’s (Chŏng Sŭng-hwa) claims for the elimination of Kim Dae Jung. It also refers to Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tu-hwan), but only to mention that he was involved in the debate regarding Kim Dae Jung.<sup>3</sup> However, reference to Chun is counterevidence against the fact that the U.S. was paying attention to Chun regarding other matters. Also, because this report was not designated as a “Cherokee” document, which are important documents regarding U.S. policies towards Korea, it did not include sensitive information such as the possibility of military rebellion.

Piecing together the circumstances, it is possible to make the following inferences: Wickham, Gleysteen, and Washington all knew about Chun Doo

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<sup>3</sup> Telegram from the SECSTATE Washington to American Embassy in Seoul, “Weekly Status Report – Korea,” December 7, 1979, Department of State [below DoS], Don Oberdorfer Files [below DOF], Box No. 3, Dept of State [below DoS], Telegram, 1979, National Security Library [below NSL], George Washington University [below GWU].

Hwan's new military coup by December at the latest. First, as Gleysteen's testimony suggested, if U.S. intelligence sources had this knowledge, it is certain that high-ranking officials in Washington were also informed. Gleysteen's claims that he did not have knowledge of the coup is interpreted as that he did not see the specific contents of the report from intelligence sources; he would have acquired the information from Wickham. It would have been the decision of Washington that allowed Wickham to provide such intelligence to Korea on December 4. This is because given the policy decision-making process of the U.S., the provision of such important intelligence is a matter not decided unilaterally by a Commander of U.S. Forces, but through discussion with higher authorities.

If the U.S. had known the possibility of the 12/12 coup, why did they not actively seek to prevent the incident, or after it broke out, to intervene? The U.S. reaction on the day of the incident was passive. In fact, Wickham did not have the will to restrain the coup. In principle, Wickham was one of the most important actors in reacting to the circumstances of the 12/12 military confrontation, since the operational control was in the hands of the Commander of the Alliance. However, Wickham's role was limited because a coup is a mutiny in which there has been a rejection of the command system. In particular, Chun's new army group had mobilized the Defense Security Demand and private groups under conditions in which there was no Chief Martial Law Administrator. Moreover, given that the Army Headquarters was also attempting to mobilize military units, it was unlikely that Wickham's operational control could actually be exercised. As Wickham had claimed, 12/12 could have been an internal problem of the Korean Army.

However, Wickham did have the means and opportunity to respond to the 12/12 military rebellion, though he did not utilize them. Following Roh Jae Hyun's escape to the Eighth U.S. Army on the 12<sup>th</sup> and because the Commander in Chief of the Combined Forces Command who headed the unit's operational control and the Minister of National Defense who headed the prerogative of supreme command were together, if there had been a desire, they could have carried out an active response. The core actor monitoring the 12/12 incident was Minister of National Defense Roh. Chun's military group demanded consent for the arrest of Chung Seung Hwa, the Chief Martial Law Administrator, by pressuring president Choi.

Choi, meanwhile, asserted that he could not give consent without consulting the Ministry of National Defense. At the same time, Army Headquarters personnel who resisted Chun's rebel forces were requesting Roh Jae Hyun's approval to mobilize forces to suppress the rebellion. In other words, the circumstances were that, the situation would develop according to whomever Roh sided with. At this important moment, Roh was at the U.S. Eighth Army bunker with Wickham, who had operational control over mobilizing rebel force troops and units that could repress the rebels.

Wickham, when he detected partial movement of the military at around 8 pm on December 12, inspected the signal axis and command system of the Combined Forces Command with Ryu Byung Hyun, the Deputy Commander in Chief for the Command. He confirmed that there were no peculiarities, and that there were no signs of North Korea's movement or unusual signs in the contents while monitoring them. At around 11 pm they inspected the military for possible mobilization and its allegiances with Wickham's help because Roh and Kim Jong Hwan, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had already escaped to the eighth U.S. army (Wickham 1999: 53, 58-59). At around 8 pm when Chun's new army group arrested Chung, the Army Headquarters fully comprehended the circumstances and decided to suppress the rebellion. Accordingly, then Commanding Officer for Capital Defense Command Jang Tae Wan requested Commanding Officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Corps Lee Gun Young for the Capital Mechanized Infantry Division and mobilization of the 26<sup>th</sup> infantry division, from divisions that did not participate in the coup. Lee's position was that he would mobilize the army immediately after confirmation by the Minister of National Defense (Jang 1993: 132). The 26<sup>th</sup> division and the Capital Mechanized Infantry Division were divisions under the operational control of the Combined Forces Command. Thus, with the consent of Wickham, who had the operational control, and decision by Roh, who was able to command the army by being delegated with the operational control from the president in cases of emergency, suppressing the rebels was possible because there was an army ready to be mobilized.

However, as the U.S. revealed at the Korean Congressional Special Committee hearing on Kwangju, Wickham urged the units loyal to the Korean Ministry of National Defense, who might respond to those responsible for the coup, that their movement should be restricted to prevent

any clashes (Wickham 1999: 197). He reasoned that because the situation was still unclear, a clash based on erroneous information could be inevitable. He persuaded Roh to wait until daybreak emphasizing the clear guidelines that stipulated that not one single Korean unit should be moved (Wickham 1999: 58-59). The point here is that since there was at least 6 hours' leeway because if the suppressing army decided not to act, the consequences would be to afford the rebel army time to complete its plan.<sup>4</sup> If the level of concern was that of a "mistaken collision," when considering the possible clash resulting from suppressing the rebellion, the conclusion is that from the beginning, Wickham had had no desire to intervene.

In addition to this, at the time of the incident, Wickham asserted that he did not know which division of the army was moving, and when he did gain knowledge he claimed that it was too late. Moreover, what's more, Wickham said that there was nothing to do but accept the consequences because even if they did formulate orders, they would have been ignored (Wickham 1999: 59-60). There have been controversies regarding whether Wickham did not have information on the movement of units controlled by the Combined Forces Command. In particular, there were arguments that regardless of Wickham's claims, the Combined Forces Command would have known about the movement of Roe Tae Woo's 9<sup>th</sup> division.<sup>5</sup> The 12/12 incident was a military rebellion; the army went into action without notifying superior authority, and thus the headquarters may not have had detailed knowledge. However, after the 10/26 incident, the U.S. was satisfied with the founding of the Combined Forces Command, and it was concluded that despite the confusion of the 10/26 incident, U.S.-Korean cooperation was prompt and effective and was carrying out its function well. The U.S. had immediate access to intelligence on the circumstances through the Combined Forces Command channel; what's more, the organization of martial law armies was also carried out

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<sup>4</sup> Gleysteen recalls that Roh and Kim came to the bunker at around 9 pm. Gleysteen (1999), p. 78. If his claim is right, this means that he had allowed more time to the coup forces.

<sup>5</sup> Lee claims that considering the capabilities of intelligence of the U.S., they should have known about the movement of the 9<sup>th</sup> division much earlier than what they claimed. See, Lee, S. (1993: 155).

legitimately under the supervision of the Combined Forces Command.<sup>6</sup> Thus, we cannot completely rule out that Wickham knew about the movements of the unit troops. Separate from the period of acquiring knowledge on unit movements, there is a problem in that there were no measures taken on the signal axis about the person with operational control having violated the command system. This is because the normal process is that the person with the operational control must order the return of the units who leave the realm of control back to their prior positions.

At dawn Wickham confirmed the success of the coup and claimed that it had “ended.” In the telegram Wickham sent to the superior office, he said that the Korean army would take care of problems like the 12/12 incident. He urged the U.S. to emphasize refrainment, that there might be danger of a coup, and to prepare for external threats. Wickham acknowledged that this approach, a “bystander” response, was discordant with the Carter administration’s policy of promoting democratization of Korea and minimizing the power of the military (Wickham 1999: 63-65).

Another important U.S. actor at that time was Gleysteen and his response was also passive. Gleysteen responded negatively towards the 12/12 coup. At dawn on the 13<sup>th</sup>, Gleysteen unofficially contacted president Choi and the new army group of Chun. His messages said the U.S. viewed the military incident very negatively, and that the military usurpation of power would negatively influence the American public, media and Congress.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he ordered that sensitivity was necessary in official responses. Gleysteen defined the 12/12 incident as a *coup d’état* in which a minority of a junior group in the military carried out a military takeover through a meticulous plan.<sup>8</sup> However the response he suggested was for Washington to abstain

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<sup>6</sup> Telegram from the SECSTATE Washington to American Embassy in Seoul, “Text of Scope Paper Re State Funeral for Korean President Park,” November 1, 1979, DoF, Box No. 3, DoS, Telegram, 1979, NSL, GWU, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, “Military Power Play in South Korea,” December 12, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup, National Institute for Korean History [below NIKH].

<sup>8</sup> Telegram from American Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, “Younger ROK Officers Grab Power Positions,” December 13, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup, NIKH.

from officially defining the incident as a coup but to regard it as an internal military problem, so that the Koreans could save face.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the first U.S. official statement did not specify the term “coup d’état.” The proposal focused on the claim that whatever forces that attempted to undermine the process of promoting democracy would have a deleterious effect on their relationship with the U.S., as well as security guarantees concerning North Korea.<sup>10</sup>

Later, Gleysteen revealed in his memoirs that at the night of the 12<sup>th</sup> and dawn of the 13<sup>th</sup>, he placed utmost importance on preventing two things from happening: conflict within the Korean military that might aggravate the North Koreans, and the defeat of Korea’s political liberty and civil government. Yet, of the two, Gleysteen claimed to have been on “special alert” regarding the former. Also, at the time he remembered that he had been critical of the American response to the 5/16 coup of Park Chung-hee (Gleysteen 1999: 80-81). Immediately after the 5/16 coup, then-United Nations Forces Commander Magruder and the Chargé d’Affairs of the U.S. Embassy in Korea Green announced an official statement asking all the troops under the authority of the United Nations Forces Commander to support the Korean government led by Chang Myon, which was officially approved through a legitimate procedure.<sup>11</sup> Gleysteen saw the actions of the UN Forces Commander and the Ambassador supporting the Democratic Party government and being publicly against the coup d’état as inappropriate. From the beginning, Gleysteen neither wanted to nor did stop or suppress the coup. He claimed that what was most important was to settle the damages done (Gleysteen 1999: 80)

Washington had knowledge and constant new intelligence of the Korean coup incident almost in real time. In an NSC memorandum written when the coup was just completed in the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> Korean time, which

<sup>9</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, “Military Power Play in South Korea,” December 12, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

<sup>10</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, “Press Statement on Korea,” December 13, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

<sup>11</sup> Telegram Form the Commander in Chief, U.S Forces Korea (Magruder) to the Joint Chief of Staff,” May 16, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, Vol. XXII, pp. 449-51, Recited from Tae Gyun Park, *Allied State Empire: Two Myths of the U.S.-Korea Relations* (Seoul: Changbi Publishers, 2006), pp. 202.

was the afternoon of the 12<sup>th</sup> in the U.S., Nick Platt, an NSC Asia Specialist Advisor to Brzezinski, an Assistant Special Security Officer, acknowledges that the 12/12 incident was indeed a coup by which Chun Doo Hwan usurped power.<sup>12</sup>

At around 9 am on the 13<sup>th</sup>, Washington confirmed that the requests of the new army group including the replacement of the Martial Law Commander Chung were limited and judged that power usurpation would not occur immediately. However Washington understood the motivation of the new army group, knowing that replacement of the Martial Law Commander was connected to power usurpation. Despite this, Washington accepted Gleysteen's proposal and avoided officially calling the Korea situation a coup. Accordingly, Washington corrected the former statement by the Department of State that there was an important military power struggle by saying that the statement was not an official statement of the U.S., but an uncertain prediction of the situation.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the initial reaction of Washington was in accordance with their knowledge that the 12/12 incident was really a coup by Chun's new army group which was after power. Later Washington decided on passivity based on Gleysteen's proposal, avoiding intervention or defining the situation as a coup.

Piecing everything together, Washington knew that success of the coup would negatively effect the democratization of Korea. However as Gleysteen revealed, they were more concerned about the possibility that a military clash within the South could result in a military clash on the Korean peninsula, than the defeat of political liberalism in Korea. In other words, on the day of the incident, the Carter administration's actions reflected their security interests priorities over that of Korea's democratization.

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<sup>12</sup> Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from Nick Platt, "Korean Coup," December 12, 1979, National Security Council [below NSC], Declassified Documents Reference System [below DDRS].

<sup>13</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, "Military Power Play in South Korea," December 12, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

### III. ASPECTS OF THE U.S. RESPONSE AFTER THE TWELFTH

#### 1. Wickham's Awareness and Response

Wickham was a bystander on the day of the incident, but after the 12<sup>th</sup> he showed a tough stance against the new army group to the point of contradicting Gleysteen. On the 13<sup>th</sup> when he met with Roh Jae Hyun, he criticized the actions of the new army group, claiming that they not only would impede political change, but also threaten domestic order and expose the country to the North's threats. Also, the actions of the new army group would impact Korea-U.S. relations and result in a total reconsideration of their Korea policy, including the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea, technology transfer, missile technology development, arms sales, economic aid, CFC responsibilities and authority reinforcement (Wickham 1999: 69). This warning was much more severe than Gleysteen's position: the latter claimed that America should not threaten Korea by referring to measures that were neither possible nor would be carried out. Gleysteen admits that he and Wickham did not share the same views (Gleysteen 1999: 87). At the end of December, Wickham, as one of the most important actors of the coup, delivered a message on the U.S. views on military intervention in Korean politics during a face-to-face talk with Lee Hee-sung, who became the Army Chief of Staff. At that time he warned the possibility of the U.S. reconsidering their defense program in Korea (Wickham 1999: 83).

With this, Wickham submitted a case report to the superior office on the 12/12 incident (Wickham 1999: 94-97). The main argument by Wickham can be divided in two. First, the 12/12 incident was a rebellion by Chun's new army group carried out to usurp power, and the U.S. should have made an effort towards continuing Korea's democratization process. Wickham did not name Chun's new military group as 'coup forces,' but unlike Gleysteen, used strong expressions such as 'rebellions' to make criticisms. Secondly, he claimed that the new army group, made operational control ineffective and the level of security more critical, there was a need for appropriate measures. Wickham further argued that measures to strengthen the operational control of the Combined Forces Command were necessary so that the same actions

taken by the 9<sup>th</sup> division of the 12/12 could not take place again.

Only by looking at the above telegram can we see that Wickham took the situation more seriously than Gleysteen, and requested for more serious measures to be taken. Wickham tried to avoid direct contact with Chun Doo Hwan as much as possible, as distinct from Gleysteen who met Chun after the coup on the 14<sup>th</sup>. It was in February 1980 that Wickham first met Chun.

However on the next day of the coup, the 13<sup>th</sup>, Wickham suggested knowledgeable Chun's new army group and cooperating with them. From a bystander attitude on the 12<sup>th</sup>, Wickham moved towards claiming that they now needed to work closely with the new leadership (the new army group), investigate to what extent the Korean political development could be recovered with the cooperation of the new army group, to pursue internal and external stability.

The inconsistency of Wickham's external statement and internal intelligence report resulted from his questions focusing not on the coup's anti-democratic attributes, but on the damage of the CFC's authority. In regards to the 12/12 incident, Wickham reveals that the reason for his resentment was Roe Tae Woo's disregarding the chain of command and moving a part of the 9<sup>th</sup> division into Seoul (Wickham 1999: 70, 59-60). In other words, he was angry about the damage inflicted on the operational control. It was thus Wickham's position that the circumstances could be accepted if preventative measures against the reoccurrence of such incidents were taken, and apologies were made. Officers amicable to the new army group and who had been close with Wickham at that time had significant influence on Wickham's change of attitude. Wickham had been maintaining a good relationship with then CFC Deputy Commander in Chief Ryu Byung Hyun, who was later appointed as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by the new army group.<sup>14</sup> In fact, they were together at the time of the incident.

Influence by CIA's Korean branch manager, Bob Brewster, influence also contributed to Wickham's acknowledgment of the new army group. Brewster actively spoke for the Chun's new army group and mediated the relationship

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<sup>14</sup> Wickham mainly consulted Ryu regarding many issues in Korea. Telegram from American Embassy in Seoul to the SECSTATE Washington, "Political Development in South Korea" December 7, 1979, DOF, Box No. 3, DoS, Telegram, 1979, NSL, GWU.

between them and other American officials, and Wickham's advisory groups also agreed to his "practical perspective" (Wickham 1999: 79).

## 2. Gleysteen's Position

As to Gleysteen, then-U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, his initial response was negative though he later accepted reality and tried to deal with the damage already done. In a report about the 12<sup>th</sup> that was filed on the 13<sup>th</sup>, Gleysteen defined the incident as a coup initiated by Chun's military group to usurp power and stated that there should be no possibility of showing tolerance or compromise. However it was also a conclusion that they should accept the new army group as a political reality (Wickham 1999: 49-51). This suggestion ignored the coup's continuation by maintaining a passive response. In other words, Gleysteen in fact recognized the new army group right after the coup, and saw that they had to continue regarding them as a partner to solve future problems.

However Gleysteen's position did not mean that this halted U.S. efforts in the democratization process of Korea. In Gleysteen's meeting with President Choi on the 13<sup>th</sup>, he delivered the message that the U.S. would continue supporting the liberalization process of Korean politics, and that he wanted the presidency of Choi Kyu Ha to continue.<sup>15</sup> Holbrooke made similar claims in Washington in his meeting with Kim Yong Sik, the Korean Ambassador to the U.S. The U.S. warned that if the 12/12 incident impeded the process of political liberalization in Korea or resulted in oppressing freedom of expression like emergency decree no. 9, there would be serious consequences for Korea-U.S. relations.<sup>16</sup>

The problem was that U.S. critiques of the coup, were made against a weakening Choi administration and a strengthening new military group, so demanding a democratization schedule was not practical. American pressure and criticism should have been directed towards the new army group, but

<sup>15</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, "Situation Report No. 4 0600 Hours (EST) 12/14/79," December 13, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

<sup>16</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, "Korea Focus: ROK Ambassador Kim," December 15, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

Gleysteen's attitude favored "mutual adjustment for continued cooperation" rather than what was suggested by the previous telegram on the 13<sup>th</sup>, which was "warning, and indifferent attitude." He acknowledged reality rather than using force and criticism. The first example of this was Gleysteen's request to meet Chun on the 14<sup>th</sup> immediately after the coup. By meeting Chun after his talk with President Choi, Gleysteen recognized the gravity of Chun's rise as a central axis of power.

Gleysteen's response after the incident, which concentrated on recognizing the reality of the coup instead of applying force and criticism, was in opposition to all forms of sanctions against Korea. However, Gleysteen opposed the sales of F-16s and the co-production of the F-5E, and claimed that postponement or cancellation of the SCM should be carried out.<sup>17</sup>

Gleysteen sent his second telegram outlining the development of the incident on December 28, intending to wrap up the situation. In this telegram Gleysteen clarified his support for the Choi administration, his intention of maintaining a routine military channel with the new army group without returning to previous circumstances, maintaining military stability and civil government of Korea, and his wish for abstinence of the opposition group and those not yet in a position of political power.<sup>18</sup> In other words, he gave up suppressing the coup, recognizing the reality of the new army group and cooperating with them to minimize the possible damage that can be inflicted upon Korea or the United States.

Such response was a consequence to the tendency to prioritize stability of Korea rather than its democratization. Gleysteen, although he perceived the Choi administration as incompetent, did not immediately accept the new army group as an alternative power, but left possibilities open and established a relationship with them.

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<sup>17</sup> Telegram from American Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, "Korea Focus: Relations with ROK Military," December 28, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

<sup>18</sup> Telegram from American Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, "Second Look at December 12 Incident," December 28, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

### 3. Washington's Perception

In the case of Washington, top-ranking officials such as President Carter and Secretary of State Vance had a negative perception of the 12/12 incident and sought firm sanctions. The assessment of the incident by Carter and Vance was twofold: one was the view that the new army group violated the operational control of the CFC by mobilizing front line unit in a coup, and the second view was concerned with the possibility of hindering the political democratization of Korea.<sup>19</sup> In other words, they maintained basic awareness towards the democratization of Korea. Accordingly, Washington ordered the U.S. Embassy in Korea to propose sanctions that could be mobilized but eventually it failed due to Gleysteen's firm opposition. Also, Washington was concerned that Gleysteen's request for a face-to-face talk with Chun might appear as if the U.S. acknowledged Chun's acquisition of power, but they accepted his proposal that such a talk was necessary to pass on the serious concerns of the U.S. government.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Washington shared Wickham's perception of the 12/12, but followed Gleysteen's proposal in their response.

Such a response by the Carter administration was one that embraced Holbrooke's claims. Holbrooke's basic perception of Korea's circumstances and policy directions were concentrated on stability than democratization. Via a telegram that Holbrooke sent to Gleysteen on December 4, 1979, he ordered necessary measures to be taken to prevent Korea from becoming another Iran, notifying Gleysteen of the mood in Washington regarding the hostage situation at that time. Not only the executive but also the Congress stressed the shock of the Iran hostage incident, and emphasized that the U.S. should not take any action that may result in confusion or instability of their allies.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, "Korea Focus: General Thought," December 18, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

<sup>20</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, "Korea Focus: Your Discussion with MG Chon Tu-Hwan," December 18, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup.

<sup>21</sup> Telegram from the SECSTATE Washington to American Embassy in Seoul, "Korea Focus—Nudging ROK Political Leaders," December 4, 1979, DoF, Box No. 3, DoS,

At that time in Korea, third party forces and students dissatisfied with the Choi administration united to intensify the anti-governmental demonstrations and as result, from the end of November, 200 people were arrested. Holbrooke connected this situation with the Iran situation, and ordered that American influence should be maximized to minimize collision. Especially, he delivered a message to the third party Christian forces who were leading the demonstrations demanding their halt, because there was danger to the street demonstrations in that it may bring about coercive measures by the government, resulting in chaos similar to the situation at the end of Park Chung-hee's time. Holbrooke ordered Gleysteen to seek restraint and compromise with both the government and the third-party forces, but Gleysteen revealed that the goal of such measures was to make the Korean government's trust increase with the U.S., a goal concentrated on the Korean government.<sup>22</sup> As a matter of fact, sending a message to the third-party Christian forces was an action taken to show the Korean government; whether or not the forces accommodated this and halted their demonstrations was not important. Holbrooke, taking a realistic stance of placing importance on stability, ordered a policy towards the direction of cooperating with those in power than the promotion of democracy.

Holbrook also placed significance on preventing the possibility of such incident being repeated than the possible negative impact it would have on Korean democratization, since it may cause serious instability in the country.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Holbrooke focused on preventing conflict with the new army group; he cooperated with them, in order to resolve the crisis and bring stability. As a means to carry out this policy, he made Choi clearly reveal the democracy schedule to prevent the aggravation of demonstrations. Washington accepted Holbrooke's demands and organized their policy towards the direction of preventing another coup caused by faction within the military and at the same time, continued the momentum of the democratization schedule with

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Telegram, 1979, NSL, GWU.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, "Korea Focus: General Thought," December 18, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup, NIKH.

the Choi administration's cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. ELEMENTS OF MAIN CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE U.S. RESPONSE

The perceptions and attitudes of important relevant actors in the Carter administration admit that the 12/12 incident should be defined as a coup d'état and an event that countered the democratization of Korea. However, the result was a policy that prioritized maintaining stability in the country. Wickham did in fact raise a question to the problem, but his reaction was more about the violation of the operational control of the CFC rather than the anti-democratic nature of the incident, whereas Gleysteen wanted an early solution to the problem for stability from the beginning. On the other hand, Carter and Vance perceived the 12/12 as an incident that would hinder Korean democracy, but showed acceptance of Holbrook's security-first-policy. In short, the Carter administration responded passively on the 12<sup>th</sup>, and afterwards sought early acceptance and cooperation with Chun's new army group.

In this case, what is the central variable that affected the Carter administration's response? Washington's response on the 12<sup>th</sup> showed that the Carter administration's hierarchy of preference in their policy choices was not much different to any other administration's policy towards Korea in times of threat. The Carter administration had been pressuring the Park Chung-hee administration with emphasis on human rights issues in his Korea policy (Fowler 1999; Park, W. 2007: 23-52). However his response to the 12/12 incident was a result of applying one of the main interests of the U.S. since 1945—stability on the Korean peninsula; Carter administration's "moral diplomacy" could not avoid impact.<sup>25</sup> Especially, because internal unrest in within the South could be linked to external threat, the U.S. regarded the

<sup>24</sup> Telegram from Secretary of State to American Embassy in Seoul, "Korea Focus: Your Discussion with MG Chon Tu-Hwan," December 18, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup, NIKH.

<sup>25</sup> After 1945 the order of American priorities were 1) Korean security, 2) Economic goals 3) Korean democratization. For further details see, Ha, Y. (1987: 416-423).

former no less serious than how they approached the latter.<sup>26</sup>

However, whereas the Carter administration's response to the 12/12 incident did show the priority of America's traditional consideration of security in Korea, when it is more closely analyzed, the response was a result of complex and mutual interactions among domestic, regional, and global level variables. When these variables did not mutually interact with each other, in other words if they are not simultaneously considered or mutually linked, we cannot rule out the possibility that the Carter administration's moral diplomacy would have had greater influence than what actually happened.

The first element that influenced the Carter administration's policy was the possibility of continued rebellions within the Korean military, even after the 12/12 incident. This possibility of reoccurrence was connected to the possibility of misinterpretation by North Korea in terms of the regional context of the North and South, which is again linked to a global context, a necessity to maintain stability in Northeast Asia to deal with the Iran hostage situation. Such linkage was how the Carter administration's policy was affected. After the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan on December 12, 1979, the importance of strategy according to Cold War thinking was added to their Korea policy by Washington's realists. Accordingly, the Carter administration did regard Korea's democratization important, but they preferred to promote stability of the Korean military due to concerns of disruption of stability that can result from another coup.

At that time, the U.S. was seriously concerned about the possibility of military action against the Chun's new military group. Gleysteen analyzed, in a report written on the 13<sup>th</sup>, that they could not completely overrule the possibility of a reverse coup or similar movement by another dissatisfied group,<sup>27</sup> and when he met Chun on the 14<sup>th</sup> and heard that there was the possibility of unrest within the Korean military, he recollected that he was

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<sup>26</sup> Lee Cheol Soon differentiates U.S. perception of Korean threat into "internal" and "external", and claims that the internal threat was perceived as a serious threat due to its close relationship with a significant threat, North Korea (Lee, C. 2000: 14).

<sup>27</sup> Telegram from American Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, "Younger ROK Officers Grab Power Positions," December 13, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup, NIKH.

“shocked.” Gleysteen, concerned of the possibility of another military clash that could threaten U.S. interests, consistently proposed to Washington that they must make stability of the Korean military as one of the priority concerns of their Korea policy. Such a possibility of a coup continued until the early 1980s, continuing the tension for the United States. Wickham received a request for help from generals in the Korean military planning a reverse coup at the end of January 1980, but he declined (Wickham 1999: 77-79; Gleysteen 1999: 93-97). Through this experience, the U.S. arrived at a conclusion that they had no choice but to place importance on the relationship with Chun for stability within the Korean military. Thus, although they did not give positive acknowledgment, they took a position of tacit approval towards Chun’s new army group in order to prevent security threats of internal clash within the military.

The second element that had impact on U.S. policy was their distrust of the Choi administration. Gleysteen had doubt that the Choi administration could successfully carry out the democracy schedule. He expressed his distrust of the Choi administration in the process of political liberalization of Korea since 10/26. He especially showed explicit dissatisfaction when Choi continuously delayed the initiation of the schedule despite the numerous proposals that were made. Accordingly, Gleysteen gradually showed a position of not trusting the Choi government’s leadership.

As the 12/12 incident broke out, doubts about the Choi administration’s role and ability increased. Gleysteen emphasized several times on the day he met Choi, the 13<sup>th</sup>, that it is imperative for Choi to continuously carry out the functions of a president. However, he had made assessment that Choi had lost the already weak foundation of his support and thus he has no choice but to be swayed by the new army group.<sup>28</sup> Wickham also assessed Choi to be lacking powerful leadership and ties with the military (Wickham 1999: 94).

After all, the U.S. recognized Chun’s new army group without much hesitation or concern, as one of Korea’s significant political bodies as a result of two considerations: one was the concern that the Choi administration

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<sup>28</sup> Telegram from American Embassy in Seoul to Secretary of State, “Discussion of Military Grab with President Choi,” December 13, 1979, DoF, Box No. 2, Chun 12/12 Coup, NIKH.

is not capable of carrying out the democracy schedule, which is deemed to bring chaos, on time, and the second was the interest of preventing another coup for stability. It was the judgment of the U.S. that there was a need to maintain an amicable relationship with Chun, the newly rising “big shot” in political power, in order to maintain stability in Korea.

If these two considerations outlined here started in the domestic levels of Korea and affected the regional levels, the hostage incident had impact on the international levels of the U.S. in relation to the Korea policy, affecting the entire American foreign policy. After the collapse of the pro-U.S. government in Iran, the Carter administration made a judgment that there was a need for a governmental structure that could win public support through political liberalization in order to maintain stability. However, with the Iran crisis, Washington concentrated on the Iran issue, and it took on a more realistic view regarding stability to be a priority. Accordingly, the case of Korea was placed along these lines; the U.S. felt the need for stability first, regardless of who the political forces were.

At that time, there was a change in the U.S. president’s policy because of the Iran hostage situation. Apart from the conflicting views of Vance and Brzezinski since the beginning of the administration, there also were differing perspectives among the NSC staffs. While Brzezinski claimed that they had to be ready to use military force if necessary to solve the problem, Vance emphasized that dialogue and negotiation without provoking Iran was best. Some NSC staffmembers with a realist perspective proposed, holding up the situation of the hostage incident, that the administration move towards placing stability and security as priority; they interpreted the hostage situation from a security and strategic aspect by linking it to the USSR, and viewed that the situation could act positively for the Soviets. It was their judgment that the Soviets could strengthen the leftists in Iran by using the incident, or bandwagon with Iran’s anti-Americanism to prevent anti-Soviet forces in Iran.<sup>29</sup> Also, when the State Department, concerned with the safety

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<sup>29</sup> Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from Paul B. Henze, “Thought on Iran,” November 9, 1979, NSC, DDRS: National Foreign Assessment Center, “Soviet Efforts to Benefit from the US-Iran Crisis,” December 1, 1979, Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], DDRS.

of the dispatched diplomats, considered the return of some family members and employees, NSC's realists criticized that the executive is in a situation of panic, and proposed an active policy of sending American military forces to protect the diplomatic offices and residences. They claimed that the State Department's attempt derived from naïve and idealistic thinking, and that the administration's persistence for "moral diplomacy" needed to change.<sup>30</sup>

However, such offensive position of realists had a facet of arbitrariness. With the fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty of Iran, the U.S. lost an intimate ally in the Gulf region, proving to be negative for the supply of oil. However, it was unrealistic to claim a security threat by linking the Iran hostage situation to Soviet expansionism. Using the CIA's initial December report, realists claimed that there was a possibility for the Soviets to utilize the Iran situation but the August report concluded that the fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty was not an occurrence advantageous to the Soviet Union. The argument that the U.S. had lost a buffer zone in the Gulf region to balance against the Soviet Union was only relevant in the case that the Soviets could influence the Iranians into becoming a pro-Soviet state. However, Iran's change showed the tendency of Islamic fundamentalism, which was not an advantage to the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> The Soviets also judged that, considering their problems in Central Asia, it was not bad that the Pahlavis suppressed the appearance of Islamic fundamentalism. According to the circumstances, Vance saw the appearance of Khomeini as negative to both the U.S. and the Soviet Union (Vance 1983: 346). Thus, the loss of an allied state in the Gulf region was detrimental for the U.S. in terms of balance of power, but as Brzezinski claimed it was not as serious as to have impact on the Soviet's advancement into Afghanistan (Brzezinski 1983: 356).<sup>32</sup>

On the contrary, NSC advisors, who placed importance on moral considerations, placed focus on the problem of anti-Americanism in the Islamic world rather than emphasizing the security and tactical aspect of

<sup>30</sup> Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from Paul B. Henze, "The U.S. and the Islamic World," November 27, 1979, NSC, DDRS. This was written by Henze but contains the consent of a total of 10 NSC advisors.

<sup>31</sup> Memorandum, "Iran and the USSR after the Shah," August 17, 1979, CIA, DDRS.

<sup>32</sup> Brzezinski claims that if Pahlavis were not discredited, the Soviets would not have easily invaded Afghanistan.

the Iran situation. The U.S. government's support for the Pahlavis was what caused the Iran situation, and they saw that the lack of understanding of Islam by the U.S. should be self-reflected. Accordingly, they suggested that the U.S. start creating a more productive relationship with Islam with an open mind.<sup>33</sup>

The two perspectives outlined above existed in Washington at the time, but the overall atmosphere moved towards strengthening pragmatic approaches; even parts of the U.S. Congress expressed the intention of breaking away from moral diplomacy. Since its inauguration, the Carter administration had expressed a negative stance towards the CIA's clandestine operations; it made efforts to retain transparency by changing laws that required the CIA's cooperation with Congress and decreasing the budget for such operations and personnel involved.<sup>34</sup> However, after the breakout of the Iran incident, some congressmen from the House Intelligence Committee persuaded Carter of the importance of certain CIA operations and that they must be strengthened and expanded.<sup>35</sup> It was the core of the administration's moral diplomacy, "abolition of secrecy" that was questioned.

The atmosphere in Washington developed towards legitimizing whatever means necessary to solve problems regardless of moral considerations, rather

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<sup>33</sup> Memorandum for Zbigniew Brzezinski from James M. Rentschler, "Moslem Emotions and Anti-American Sentiment: Back to Basics," December 3, 1979, NSC, DDRS. Robert Hunter, Garry Sick, Bill Griffith gave consent on the report.

<sup>34</sup> President Carter dismissed George Bush, then CIA director and appointed Stanfield Turner, announcing his severance from the past. In declaring the cessation of CIA's clandestine operations he diverted from the 60-year tradition of allocating 60% of the budget decreasing it to 5%. Also, in order to achieve transparency of the CIA, he made Congress receive constant intelligence and authorized the latter to monitor the former. However since the end of 1979 as monitoring of the CIA weakened, the Intelligence Oversight Act was passed, lowering the extent that the CIA has to report to Congress. As a result, since the end of 1980 like Turner's recollection there were new initiations of clandestine operations all over the world. For more details see, Rhodri Jeffreys Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Mark M. Lowenthal, *US Intelligence: Evolution and Anatomy* (Washington DC: Praeger with CSIS, 1984); Stansfield Turner, *Secrecy and Democracy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Letter from the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence to President Carter, December 18, 1979, U.S. House of Representatives, DDRS.

than emphasizing self-reflection in, for example, supporting the dictatorship of the Pahlevis or not attempting to adequately understand Islam. Support for minimizing moral diplomacy was strengthened by the security and strategic perspective that linked the Iran hostage situation with the Soviet Union.

In this way, proponents of pragmatism used the Iran situation by exaggerating its threat. And yet, there were practical benefits to the Iran hostage situation in that it demonstrated the impact regime collapse of an allied state can have. This lesson was then used to inform Washington's response to Korea's domestic situation, which lent authority to Holbrooke's argument that Korea should not become another Iran.

The Carter administration's moral diplomacy could not stop the collapse of the government of an allied state, of which one result was U.S. citizens being taken hostage. Given this, it was difficult for the U.S. to take into considerations human rights in its response to the 12/12 incident. In other words, pragmatists felt foremost that they had to prevent the same problems they had experienced in Iran resulting from military clashes. As a consequence, the instability of Korea's domestic politics was widely accepted in Washington.

And yet given there was no anti-American sentiment in Korea at the time, which was a central factor in the Iran hostage situation. Robert Rich, then Chief of the Korean bureau of the U.S. Department in State, recalls in his memoirs that although it was proposed at the White House and Congress that Korea may become the second Iran, it was also raised in the State Department that this was less likely to be the case (Fowler 1999: 284). Thus, the policy principles of Gleysteen and Holbrooke for prioritizing stability in Korea, just like the security impact that was linked to the Iran situation, derived from realistic considerations they preferred rather than the calculated possibilities or predictions regarding the development of situation.

## V. CONCLUSION

The Carter administration had prior knowledge of the possibility of the 12/12 military coup d'état. However contrary to some claims, the administration did not intentionally hide or diminish that fact, but rather concentrated its effort

on preventing the coup by informing the Korean government. However their response on the day of the incident and their policy after the incident took the form of adapting to the new circumstances. Although the U.S. viewed this as a military rebellion that undermined democratization in Korea, they responded passively in consideration of maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula. They also did not exclude the appearance of Chun Doo Hwan's new army forces's . If the U.S. had actively promoted the democratization of Korea, they would have suppressed and acted forcefully against the new army, which had attempted to overturn the Korean political power dynamics.

This does not mean that there were no disputes in the decision-making process of the Carter administration's response. President Carter and Secretary of State Vance regarded the incident as a military coup and concentrated on its anti-democratic nature; they continued their interest in Korean democratization. In the end, however, they could not overcome traditional interests of the U.S. in Korea which focused on stability on the Korean peninsula. What's Mmoreover, the Choi administration's incompetence was the decisive factor that limited U.S. intervention. It is entirely possible that the situation following the incident could have been different if the Choi administration had actively expressed asked for help from the U.S. Choi's lethargic response to the coup provided justification for the U.S.'s passive response as well, since both the motivation and justification for intervention must be supported by the government directly affected. So long as the current government existed, the constitutional process could be nominally maintained, which in turn made it difficult for the U.S. to justify intervention. Chun's new army group had considered this outcome as well. Accordingly, the new army did not make overtaking the Choi administration their first goal, but taking over the military by eliminating Chung Seung Hwa, the Martial Law Commander.

Lastly, the Iran hostage incident also impacted the Carter administration's fundamental policies, thus significantly influencing their Korea policy. The U.S. was in a very difficult situation of having its own citizens held hostage, making a practical approach to improving security of its allied states of paramount importance; this position was reflected in the U.S.'s Korea policy. Consequently the Carter administration's response to the 12/12 incident was a case in which its most actively advocated 'moral diplomacy' was not

applied, but instead used a more pragmatic approach resulting from security interests, the passivity of the Korean government, and the outbreak of other global events.

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