

US Ambassador to South Korea slashed in knife attack

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6 March 2015

US Ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert was attacked by a solitary assailant wielding a knife in Seoul on Thursday. The ambassador suffered large cuts, but his wounds are not life threatening. The attack is being seized upon by the South Korean media to denounce “left-wing extremism.”

The attack occurred around 7:40 a.m., as Lippert was on his way to give a speech at the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Seoul. The event was organized by the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation. Lippert received five cuts including an 11-cm gash on his cheek, which required 80 stitches to close, and another smaller wound on his left arm.

He was taken to nearby Severance Hospital where he underwent surgery and is in a stable condition. Following surgery, the ambassador posted on his Twitter account, “Will be back ASAP to advance US-ROK (Republic of Korea) alliance!”

Lippert is close to President Obama, having worked as a navy intelligence officer and as the National Security Council’s chief of staff. He took his position as ambassador last October.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye, who is currently in the Middle East, called Lippert to express her concern. She condemned what she called an “attack on the South Korea-US alliance.”

The attacker, an apparently unhinged man named Kim Gi-jong, was immediately arrested at the scene as he denounced ongoing war games by US and South Korean forces. Prior to assaulting Lippert, he shouted, “South and North Korea should be reunified!” After his arrest, he said, “I carried out the terror attack. I have prepared to disseminate leaflets to oppose the [South Korea-US] military exercise for a war.”

Kim apparently was referring to the Key Resolve and Foal Eagle exercises—annual war games by US, South

Korean and allied forces aimed at North Korea, that take place in spring. They began this year on Monday and are a key part of Washington’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at isolating and threatening China.

Kim was taken away on a stretcher after apparently having his ankle broken as he was being detained by security officials. He was denied medical attention for three hours as police questioned him. “We considered the gravity of the issue and that the act could be seen as terrorism,” an unnamed prosecution official stated.

Kim’s lawyer, Hwang Sang-hyeon stated yesterday, at the Seoul Jongno police station where Kim was held, that his client “was unaware of how deep Lippert’s injuries would be and that he had attacked the ambassador without any particular feelings towards Lippert himself.” He was “sounding an alarm in America,” Hwang said.

The Stalinist regime in North Korea issued a provocative statement hailing the attack as a “just punishment for US warmongers.”

Such individual acts of violence aimed at state officials are reactionary and have nothing to do with socialist politics. The comments both of the attacker and of the North Korean regime play right into the hands of the most aggressive factions in the US and South Korean governments.

Park’s government has already disbanded one political party, the Unified Progressive Party, in December while seeking the dissolution of other groups, all under the pretext that they support North Korea. Kim’s reactionary attack and North Korea’s approval of it will only allow Seoul to step up its anti-democratic campaign against political opposition.

Police and prosecutors are attempting to establish a connection between Kim and North Korea. Given Kim’s past and his ties to President Park’s

conservative Saenuri party, however, it seems unlikely that Kim acted on the orders of the North Korean regime.

Kim was well-known to South Korean police and has a history of such acts. He carried out an attack on Japanese Ambassador Toshinori Shigeie in 2010. In that attack, he threw two pieces of concrete at the Japanese envoy, but struck an embassy interpreter instead. Kim received a two-year prison sentence which was suspended for three years.

He also attempted to erect a memorial to Kim Jong-il in 2011, after the North Korean leader's death in December of that year. Kim's home and offices have also been raided by police. Kim had previously visited North Korea six times between 2006 and 2007.

He reportedly has ties to the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation, an NGO with close ties to the South Korean government. The head of the group, Hong Sa-deok, resigned following the attack. Hong is a former Saenuri Party lawmaker and a close ally of President Park Geun-hye.

Speaking anonymously, a police official told the media that they did not think Kim would be present at Thursday's event.

Kim also stated that he was the head of a nationalist group known as Woorimadang, or Our Land, which often protests against Japanese claims to the Dokdo Islets, a rock formation approximately half way between Japan and the Korean Peninsula in the Sea of Japan. The South Korean bourgeoisie regularly utilizes this dispute to whip up anti-Japanese sentiment to distract from the social crisis at home.

The United States government did not directly link the attack to North Korea, as South Korean media did. Marie Harf, the deputy spokeswoman for the State Department, released a statement saying, "The U.S.-ROK alliance is strong; we will not be deterred by senseless acts of violence." She added, "We cannot speculate on a motive at this time."

Washington appears to be treading carefully. While Kim's actions are not supported by a majority of South Koreans, there is broad popular opposition to US military escalation in the region, as well as to the reactionary role of US imperialism in dividing the Korean peninsula after World War II.

The attack comes less than a week after Wendy Sherman, the Under Secretary of State for Political

Affairs, seemed to chastise Seoul for earning "cheap applause by vilifying a former enemy"—a comment that many saw as blaming South Korea for its current tense relations with Japan, another key US ally in the region.

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