Attack on the US Ambassador to South Korea

On 5 March 2015 an armed attack was carried out at the United States Embassy to the Republic of Korea. The incident occurred at 7:35 am in the cultural centre, where the 42-year-old US Ambassador Mark Lippert had arrived for breakfast and a lecture. According to witnesses, the 55-year-old Korean Kim Ki-jong seated at another table, suddenly stood up, gave the man seated next to him some papers and quickly walked over to the table where the ambassador sat. Kim came from behind on the right, took out a long fruit knife, and attacked Lippert, knocking him down on the table, and began striking indiscriminately, shouting protest slogans against the conduct of joint military exercises of the US and the Republic of Korea, which prevent unification of the countries.

This is a very remarkable event, as this is the first time a “terrorist attack” of this kind has occurred in the Republic of Korea. Of course, in the 1980s, on a wave of anti-Americanism, South Korean students repeatedly captured the American Cultural Centres in different cities, but no one rushed the ambassador with a knife, and in the centre of the city.

The attack occurred not just in the centre, but at a place almost analogue to the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky bridge, from the standpoint of its proximity to government institutions. The well-guarded American Embassy is also nearby. But so far, the South Korean media are not asking loud questions about where those who were supposed to be watching were looking. Indeed, Seoul is considered a very safe city in terms of street crime.

Amateurs looking everywhere for the "State Department ears" might happily find them: the attack occurred just before the regular spring exacerbation of inter-Korean relations, and also against the background of an active debate of the ruling camp, devoted to whether Park Geun-hye should travel to Moscow for the festivities dedicated to the 70th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War.

It is highly probable that Kim Jong-un will be there. The Moscow activities may prove to be a platform for a meeting of the two leaders. Remember that South Korea, at least formally, did not join the American sanctions against Russia, introduced on the background of the Ukrainian crisis. However, the attack on the American ambassador has already caused an appropriate reaction in Washington, and may force Seoul to take steps to demonstrate the inviolability of the South Korean - American alliance.

And one to two days before the attack there was another unpleasant confusion, when the US Under Secretary of State, W. Sherman, speaking about the historical disputes in East Asia, dared to blame not just Japan in fuelling such conflicts, but also Korea. Quite a few nationalistic circles in the Republic of Korea directly called such actions an insult and demanded an explanation and an apology.

But let's put aside the accusations of the attempt being orchestrated. They must be proven with something more serious than the fabrications of "armchair analysts." Let us better turn our attention back to "the man with the knife," from whom the intelligence, and the media of the Republic of Korea have begun to fashion a pro-North Korean leftist, who, it turns out, had been 7 times to the DPRK, and tried to establish a memorial altar in the street in honour of Kim Jong Il.

In fact, Kim Ki-jong is a pretty well-known personality, and there is a lot of information about him. He is the head of a
liberal civilian organization "Urimadan," which advocates for affiliation of the Republic of Korea with the Dokto Islands in the East Sea, and also is a member of the organization "Coalition Movement for National Unity." In 2006, when the authorities of the Japanese Shimane Prefecture announced the establishment of Takeshima Day, Kim Ki-jong officially registered the address of his family on these two rocky islands. In July 2010, Kim Ki-jong was sentenced by the court to two years in prison with a suspended execution of his sentence by three years for the attack on then-Ambassador of Japan to the Republic of Korea.

Here we must note one important detail. Nationalism is a rather important part of the Korean state ideology. And when the actions of nationalists, even if they are radical actions, protect the interests of the country, a blind eye is often turned, especially when it relates to "hot topics," such as disputes with Japan on historical or territorial issues. If one reads carefully the information message from government media of the RK, it is clear that the attempt to throw pieces of concrete at the Japanese Ambassador, which this same person made 5 years ago, (also a very definite attempt to inflict serious bodily injury to a foreign diplomat) for Kim did not end with anything serious. If you compare the dates, it turns out that the "two-year prison term with a suspended execution of 3 years," was clearly not fully served, if he was ever even in custody. But he wrote a book about it, which does not pass as anything near extremist literature.

Remember for comparison, the case of the United Progressive Party, when the opposition deputy in 2014 received 7 years for "secretly performing North Korean revolutionary songs" with his associates.

So, perhaps it all depends on which foreign diplomats the "indignant citizens" are trying to injure. One can also remember the attempt to kill an American citizen with a large concourse of people in 2014, using home-made firebombs. However, this American citizen was pro-North Korean, and was going to tell a mass auditorium about what she had seen in the DPRK. In the end, they tried to declare the goon from the ultra-right organization a hero, the criminal case against him virtually hushed up, but the victim was deported under the Law on National Security.

As for motives, there are two important points. On the one hand, an intelligent person understands that a terrorist attack with a pro-North Korean slogan as well as most type actions of this kind will cause the directly opposite reaction in modern society, because these views are associated with such attacks. That is because most of the South Korean Left speaking, among other things, against US-South Korean joint military exercises, emphasize their commitment to non-violent methods of conflict. So we cannot exclude the possibility that the reason for the attack was not political or psychological, but psychiatric.

On the other hand, in Korea there is a tradition yysa – "Fighters for justice," in which the attack on the bureaucrat-oppressor or representative of the imperialist powers is not considered a crime, but rather a patriotic act. There is a whole host of national RK heroes, who could be called terrorists on formal grounds, whose actions were directed at the occupiers. Therefore, the border between terrorism and patriotism is not so clear, as in the western powers, and even the North Korean reaction in the detailed article entitled "Just punishment for the US warmongers," which appeared on the site of the Korean Central News Agency, is worth considering in this context.

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