

## COMMENT

Whatever happened to Korean Airlines *Flight 007*? Three months have passed, the media have lost all interest — but it is hard to believe that a rational explanation of the incident has not reached President Reagan's desk by now. It made sense from the very beginning that the Russian fighter pilot, far out over the sea and running out of fuel, on whose solitary judgment the Soviet air defence command finally had to rely, decided that the intruder had better be shot down. He may well have misidentified the type of aircraft: that would have been professional incompetence. He may well have believed that the Americans are perfectly capable of sending a civil aircraft on a spying mission: Russian fighter pilots are presumably not trained to place much faith in American good intentions. On that side, the lessons to be drawn are simply that the Soviet military authorities are disposed to react in a ruthless and paranoid fashion in defence of their domestic air space, and that the decisive judgment lay in the end with a junior officer who may very well have been frightened and confused. None of that is new or surprising. It has always been obvious that the decision to open fire would depend essentially on some junior officer's (mis)judgment. Come to think of it, that would be a more bearable way of ending our civilization than a telephone call by Ronald Reagan.

What remains dark is the reason for the Korean airliner's resolute flight across the key naval bases from which the Soviet Union is attempting to restore the balance of terror. As everybody knows, the latest crop of missiles seeded in the green fields of southern England will reduce Moscow's warning of nuclear attack from twenty to six minutes. It will still take twenty minutes for the Russian missiles to reach the east coast of America. The Russians are now attempting to recover the equality with the Americans upon which the whole balance of mutual deterrence rests. Their only prospect of success is to build up a fleet of submarines that are able to get near enough to the western seaboard of the United States to reduce the warning time for Washington in case of nuclear attack.

If the Russians are prevented from restoring the balance of terror in this way, of course, the only alternative is to get the American missiles out of western Europe. Given the immense technological superiority of the American defence system, the Russians certainly face an almost hopeless task in the Pacific Ocean. Their determination to prevent surveillance of the submarine bases at Sakhalin and in the Kuril Islands is really not so paranoid after all.

One reason that the Korean airliner flew over the Russian bases may have been that the pilot was taking a short cut. He would only have saved a couple of hours. If the pilot of a civil airliner was as daredevil as that, it would not be surprising that the story should drop out of the media. Another reason may have been that the computer fed in wrong information before the aircraft left the United States. That would not be a nice reason for the travelling public to know, either. There are not many other reasons available. It is very odd that, with all the sophisticated devices that must monitor the area all the time, the Americans never alerted the Russians nor even noticed the errant aircraft. It might be thought somewhat alarming if the systems for preventing the accidental outbreak of nuclear war turned out to be as ineffective as they apparently were on this occasion. There was also the curiously belated admission by Washington that *another* aircraft was on a spying mission in the vicinity. It can do nothing but good, in present circumstances, to try to imagine how things look from the Russian point of view. In the case of the Korean airliner, certainly, it does not even require any Russian paranoia to suspect the unthinkable. In the continuing absence of any rational explanation for the airliner's course one cannot be blamed for wondering if it was gathering military intelligence. This would mean, of course, that American government spokesmen must sometimes be capable of "disinformation". It would mean that the Defence Community in the United States must be capable of playing poker with the Russians in the most dangerous air space in the Pacific Ocean. The unthinkable, alas, makes the best sense.