

## CHAPTER 6

### SOUTH KOREA, 1968–1980

Though it relies extensively on atomic power as a civilian source of energy, South Korea's interest in atomic power has not always been peaceful. In 1970, South Korea undertook feasibility studies to explore nuclear weapons development. Two years later, it began devoting resources to the development of nuclear weapons. This program lasted several years before its cancellation in 1975 and the accompanying decision to ratify the NPT. However, these actions did not completely end South Korea's nuclear activities. Suspicions of a nuclear program re-emerged in the late 1970s when a major domestic debate erupted briefly in South Korea over its defense policy.

My theory explains South Korea's nuclear interest. President Park Chung-hee first considered nuclear weapons acquisition in response to Nixon's sudden announcement to withdraw about a third of American forces from South Korea. This announcement took place when the United States was seeking to reduce its military commitments in East Asia as a result of mounting economic difficulties at home and military difficulties in Vietnam. Park bolstered his country's nuclear program within a few years. Doubts regarding American reliability persisted even though Nixon made no further troop withdrawals. Thus, South Korean nuclear ambitions continued unabated until the program's discovery in 1974. Shortly thereafter the United States used a variety of levers to force the program's dismantlement and compel South Korea to ratify the NPT. I show that the United States was able to coerce a favorable counterproliferation settlement because South Korea was uniquely dependent on the United States for its economic needs. Still, the United States had to reassure South Korean leaders that its security guarantees were reliable. Whether such efforts were successful is open to question. South Korean leaders intimated that they would reconstitute their nuclear program when Jimmy Carter tried (unsuccessfully) to withdraw all American troops from South Korea. Safeguard violations occurred into the early 1980s.

Before assessing the case evidence, I describe the strategic and domestic context that South Korean leaders faced.

### *The Strategic Context*

Following the July 1953 armistice that ended the active stage of the Korean War, the United States signed a new alliance treaty with South Korea and established a large troop presence on its territory. Yet post-war South Korea was in a precarious economic condition. Relative to the North, it was poor and lacked industry. Recognizing this disparity, American policy-makers understood the need to develop South Korea economically. Consequently, the United States coupled military support with economic aid and programs.<sup>516</sup> Nevertheless, South Korea did not rely exclusively on American aid. Shortly after taking power through a coup in 1961, Park used his military dictatorship to commit his country to a statist, export-oriented program that generated rapid economic growth and industrialization.<sup>517</sup> South Korea's industrial capacity increased several-fold by the end of the 1960s.

Despite the alliance and the armistice, South Korea's geopolitical environment remained threatening. After all, North Korea was conventionally superior and enjoyed the patronage of both the Soviet Union and China. A Chinese occupation force remained in North Korea until 1958, during which time North Korea repaired its economy. After the withdrawal of Chinese forces, Kim Il-sung signed mutual defense treaties with both communist powers before eventually siding with China in the Sino-Soviet split. This realignment was significant: not only did China pursue a confrontational foreign policy towards its neighbors, it also succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons by 1964. Within several years of this development, North Korea resumed an aggressive foreign policy directed against American and South Korean interests. Hoping to undermine the anti-communist alliance and incite an insurgency in the South, North Korea initiated irregular warfare in the area around the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1968. Aside from a series of border skirmishes that took place over three years, the North Korean

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<sup>516</sup> The Department of the Army to the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (Hull), FRUS 1952-54, 9: 1877-1878.

<sup>517</sup> Alice Amsden, *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989).

government attempted to assassinate Park in an incident called the Blue House Raid on January 17, 1968. One week later, North Korean patrol boats captured the *USS Pueblo* and its American crew in international waters. Despite the close timing of these actions, the Johnson administration believed that North Korea did not want war, preferring instead to harass American forces and challenge the American military presence in East Asia.<sup>518</sup> However, when North Korean fighter jets shot down an EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft, some members of the Nixon administration believed that the retaliatory use of force was finally necessary.<sup>519</sup> Though the United States decided against a military response, its leaders noted South Korea's heightened threat perceptions. Nixon observed that the mood in South Korea was "very jittery." Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earl Wheeler commented that "they are apprehensive we won't do anything."<sup>520</sup>

These North Korean provocations took place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. South Korea provided significant military assistance to the United States in that conflict, having at one point about fifty thousand troops in Vietnam. Several reasons explain the magnitude of South Korea's military contributions. First, President Johnson wanted South Korea to share the burden of fighting the war.<sup>521</sup> Second, for these contributions, South Korea received considerable increases in American economic and military assistance.<sup>522</sup> It also extracted greater assurances of American security commitments.<sup>523</sup> Third, Park shared American concerns that the fate of East Asian states in the struggle against transnational communism were linked. American success in Vietnam would, after all, strengthen the anti-communist coalition in the region.

Because the North was still the more powerful of the two Koreas, the American military presence improved the local conventional balance of power in the South's favor.

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<sup>518</sup> Memorandum From Director of Central Intelligence Helms to Secretary Defense McNamara, January 23, 1968, FRUS 1964-68 29: 464-465; Summary Minutes of Pueblo Group, January 24, 1968, FRUS 1964-68 29: 469-474.

<sup>519</sup> Memorandum From the President's Military Adviser (Haig) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), April 16, 1969, FRUS 1969-72 19: 26-27.

<sup>520</sup> Minutes of a NSC Meeting, April 16, 1969, FRUS 1969-72 19: 31.

<sup>521</sup> Sung Gul Hong, "The Search for Deterrence: Park's Nuclear Option," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011): 484.

<sup>522</sup> Se Jin Kim, "South Korea's Involvement in Vietnam and Its Economic and Political Impact," *Asian Survey*, vol. 10, no. 6 (1970): 519.

<sup>523</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, May 18, 1965, FRUS 1964-1968, 29: 106-109.

Reducing that military presence would have meant a weakening of South Korea's position vis-à-vis the North. Still, American tactical nuclear weapons were stationed so as to provide nuclear extended deterrence. My theory would thus predict that changes to American conventional military deployments would drive South Korea's nuclear interest. By contrast, a threat-based explanation would look to North Korean aggression as being sufficient in shaping South Korea's behavior.

### *The Domestic Context*

For the period I examine, Park led a repressive military dictatorship following a coup d'état in 1960. Under his leadership, South Korea became a 'developmental' state whereby its government assumed an active role in promoting economic growth. This strategy meant forging alliances with labor and industry, protecting fledgling export industries, and establishing a large government bureaucracy to oversee the private sector. Though Chalmers Johnson describes neighboring Japan as an archetype of the developmental state, other observers have extended the label to South Korea.<sup>524</sup> This 'Asian Tiger' maintained high growth rates between the 1960s and the 1990s largely by strengthening those industries that produced export goods intended for rich industrialized states.<sup>525</sup> According to the coalition thesis, South Korea should not engage in nuclear weapons activities at all so as not to compromise such export-dependent strategies. Because South Korea was an autocracy in an intense security environment, norms might have been permissive enough such that anti-nuclear or anti-militarist beliefs did not resonate among members of South Korean society.

### **South Korea's Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons**

Demonstrating its newfound nuclear interest, the South Korean government founded in August 1970 two new defense agencies, the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) and the Weapons Exploitation Committee (WEC), to explore the development of an

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<sup>524</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982); and Peter B. Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>525</sup> Ezra F. Vogel, *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

indigenous nuclear weapons program. Shortly thereafter, under Park's leadership, the WEC unanimously decided to pursue nuclear weapons development.

By this time, South Korea had a very nascent civilian nuclear program. Throughout the 1960s, South Korea's access to nuclear materials was severely limited. As a beneficiary of Eisenhower's 'Atoms for Peace' initiative, South Korea acquired a small nuclear reactor in 1956. This reactor could not be used to generate civilian energy, let alone process materials necessary to produce a nuclear weapon. It was under surveillance by the IAEA when South Korea joined that organization in 1956. Instead, South Korea used the reactor for peaceful scientific research and creating radioisotopes for medical and agricultural purposes. Access to this technology also raised hopes for the future acquisition of civilian nuclear power.<sup>526</sup> To make further progress in nuclear research, South Korea established the Korean Atomic Energy Research Institute and the Office of Atomic Energy. With American assistance, South Korea built a General Dynamics-designed 250-kilowatt research reactor. It was in the late 1960s that South Korea decided to undertake a major initiative directed at creating its own nuclear fuel cycle. Its aim was to construct a 500-megawatt electric nuclear power plant (the Kori 1) and study nuclear fuel fabrication and reprocessing by 1976.<sup>527</sup> KAERI had by this time a twelve-year plan that foresaw national energy autonomy, supported by a uranium enrichment factory and reprocessing facility that would be running by 1981. Yet the purpose of such initiatives was arguably to address South Korea's increasing energy needs to support its rapid industrial growth. In fact, KAERI sought American support for its nuclear research.<sup>528</sup> However, the activities of the newly created WEC suggest a dramatic change in South Korea's intentions towards atomic energy.

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<sup>526</sup> Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyung Kim, "Containing the Atom: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Nuclear Power in the United States and South Korea." *Minerva*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2009): 132.

<sup>527</sup> Jungmin Kang and Harold A. Feiveson, "South Korea's Shifting and Controversial Interest in Spent Fuel Reprocessing," *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2001): 74. Wonjaryokchong, *Hanguk Wonjaryok Samsipnyonsa* [Thirty Year History of Korean Nuclear Energy] (Daeduk, South Korea: Wonjaryok-yonguso, 1990): 55-142 and 170. This Korean-language secondary source argues that South Korea planned to acquire a reprocessing capability.

<sup>528</sup> Sung Gol Hong, "The Search for Deterrence: Park's Nuclear Option," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, eds. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011): 486-489.

By 1972, South Korea started mobilizing military, academic, and industrial resources towards the production of nuclear weapons.<sup>529</sup> However, the program (called Project 890) soon encountered several technical challenges. One problem was South Korea's limited access to the sensitive nuclear materials needed to produce a weapon. For much of South Korea's history of nuclear research until then, the United States was a major source of nuclear technology and fuel. Because of expected American opposition to this new initiative, South Korea had to find alternative suppliers to acquire a reprocessing capability. To this end, South Korea sent the Minister of Science and Technology to enlist the technical cooperation of France and Great Britain in building a reprocessing facility. Furthermore, South Korea sent representatives to other nuclear capable countries such as Canada and Israel. These initiatives were successful in procuring foreign assistance. By 1974, South Korea signed a contract with the French company Saint Gobain Technique Nouvelle to acquire the design of a reprocessing facility and another contract with the Belgian company Belgonucléaire for mixed nuclear fuel fabrication facilities.<sup>530</sup> South Korean scientists were also able to secure the import of the heavy-water reactor (the NRX) from Canada. Having this type of reactor would enable South Korea to produce weapon-grade plutonium.<sup>531</sup> Still, the nuclear program remained aspirational in 1974 with little physical infrastructure in place.

### **South Korean Anxieties as Motivation**

South Korea's behavior reflected concerns over American alliance commitments. At this time, the situation facing the United States in Vietnam appeared increasingly futile. The attritional warfare produced high casualties for both sides of the conflict. Partly because the military relied on conscription to support the campaign, members of the American public became increasingly critical of their country's involvement in the war. Taking advantage of these sentiments, a signature aspect of Nixon's successful Presidential election campaign in 1968 was his pledge to end the Vietnam War. As President, Nixon believed that an American withdrawal from Vietnam could only be achieved if a

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<sup>529</sup> Seung-Young Kim, "Security, Nationalism, and the Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons and Missiles: The South Korean Case, 1970-82." *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2001): 58.

<sup>530</sup> Hong, "The Search," 490.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

workable arrangement existed that guaranteed South Vietnam's security.<sup>532</sup> Amid faltering negotiations with the North Vietnamese and increasing domestic pressure, Nixon initiated a strategy of phased troop withdrawals and increased reliance on Vietnamese troops.<sup>533</sup> Such was the context of the Nixon Doctrine, which stated that although the United States would maintain its treaty commitments and continue to provide nuclear security guarantees, it would ask its allies to contribute more to satisfy their own security needs.

To clarify the Nixon Doctrine, Nixon communicated with key decision-makers in East Asia.<sup>534</sup> On August 21, 1969, Nixon met with President Park in San Francisco to discuss the American-South Korean relationship and “elaborate on my new policy toward Asia.” Nixon told Park that “we will not retreat from the Pacific area and we will not reduce commitments.” However, he noted that South Korean “efforts toward military and economic self-reliance are the correct road to take.” Park reminded Nixon that the American troop presence deterred Kim Il-sung from invading the South and argued that Kim Il-sung was provoking the United States to reduce its military presence. When Park asked about troop withdrawals from Korea, his remarks elicited no direct response from Nixon. Indeed, Nixon knew he was vague and imprecise in his conversation with Park. At one point he admitted to Park that his comment about American military commitments was a “general statement.”<sup>535</sup> Still, within several months, Nixon alerted National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger that “the time has come to reduce our Korean presence” by “half.” Nixon desired this change in policy for some time, but he had to wait some

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<sup>532</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, January 19, 1969, FRUS 1969-76 6: 2-3; Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, March 10, 1969 FRUS 1969-76, 6: 100

<sup>533</sup> National Security Study Memorandum 36, April 10, 1969, FRUS 1969-1976 6: 195-196; Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, November 3, 1969.

<sup>534</sup> For an extensive discussion on the Nixon Doctrine and its impact on South Korea, see Joo-Hong Nam, *America's Commitment to South Korea: The First Decade of the Nixon Doctrine* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>535</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, August 21, 1969, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 96-100. In a private conversation with Kissinger, the South Korean Prime Minister Kim Jong Pil later referred to this exchange to reproach the Nixon administration for its misleading assurances in the past. Kissinger did not dispute the substance of Park and Nixon's conversation, but added that no decision was made at the time to reduce American forces. Memorandum of Conversation, December 2, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 213-216.

time after the shooting down of the EC-121.<sup>536</sup> A National Security Decision Memorandum in March 1970 noted the need to remove one of the two infantry divisions from South Korea by the middle of 1971.<sup>537</sup>

Subsequently, South Korean insecurity deepened. It already faced a dangerous threat environment since the conventionally superior North was behaving provocatively under China's patronage. Accordingly, South Korean leaders expressed concern over the implications of the partial withdrawal.<sup>538</sup> Ahead of implementing this policy the Nixon administration made a number of consultations with South Korea. When Wheeler mentioned the possibility of these cuts to Park, the South Korean president expressed "concern at the prospect of a pull-out or substantial reduction in American troops in Korea" and commented that war would be "inevitable" following the withdrawal of American troops. Yet Wheeler noted that Park was also "contradictory" when the South Korean President added that South Korea would have to provide its own deterrent and defense capability.<sup>539</sup> Interestingly, an examination of the discussions between representatives of the two governments reveals that South Korean leaders did not expect any troop withdrawals from South Korea. Indeed, according to Chae-jin Lee, "Park left San Francisco with the belief that Nixon, despite his plan for Vietnamization, would not withdraw US troops from South Korea so long as South Korean troops remained in

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<sup>536</sup> Memorandum From President Nixon to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), November 24, 1969, FRUS 1969-72 19: 117. One should not overstate Nixon's role in effecting troop withdrawals from South Korea. Johnson had already commissioned an internal report to re-evaluate the American relationship with South Korea. One suggestion mooted by the report emphasized the need to reduce the American presence by one division by 1973. Paper Prepared by the Policy Planning Council of the Department of State, June 15, 1968, FRUS 1964-68 29: 435. Interestingly, a 1965 NIE observed that "[the ROK Government] will also, like all its predecessors, oppose any withdrawals of US forces from the ROK, both because of the impact on South Korean morale, and because in recent years the ROK has earned some \$50 million annually from expenditures by US forces." NIE 42/14.2-65, 'The Korean Problem,' January 22, 1965, p. 8, folder: "South Korea (42)," Box 6, National Intelligence Estimates, National Security File, LBJL.

<sup>537</sup> National Security Decision Memorandum 48, 'U.S. Programs in Korea,' March 20, 1970, Box H-208, National Security Council Institutional Files, Richard M. Nixon Library (RMNL).

<sup>538</sup> Cha also uncovers evidence that the South Korean leadership feared American abandonment. See Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, 64-67.

<sup>539</sup> Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, November 25, 1969, FRUS 1969-72 19: 117-118.

Vietnam and that if he eventually decided to do so, it would only take place after full consultation with South Korea in advance.”<sup>540</sup>

That the United States sent mixed signals is one possible reason for the South Korean government's apparent lack of foresight. That is, South Korean officials were not emotionally prepared for the troop withdrawal because they had received some indications that none were forthcoming. On the one hand, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird noted to his South Korean interlocutors that “pressures for reduction of our forces in Korea are increasing”, adding that “[South Korean] forces should be modernized before we withdraw any of our forces.” The domestic pressures to which Laird referred emphasized the magnitude of the financial costs associated with maintaining such a large troop presence. On the other hand, Laird did not say that “decisions [about troop withdrawals] had been made or that there would be any immediate US troop withdrawals.”<sup>541</sup>

The confused nature of these exchanges clarifies why the South Korean government reacted harshly when Nixon finally announced the withdrawal of one combat division. With a timetable set for June 1971, the withdrawal would effectively cut the number of American troops on the peninsula from 61,000 to 40,000. Park protested and claimed that this announcement came as a “profound shock.”<sup>542</sup> To assuage concerns over American security guarantees to South Korea, Nixon wrote a personal letter to Park, promising to obtain Congressional approval for greater military assistance to South Korea and its efforts to modernize its army. However, Park suggested to the American ambassador to South Korea William Porter that without knowing the “nature and extent of modernization he cannot agree to any withdrawals.” Park further added that the uncertainty induced by even a partial withdrawal and the lack of a viable modernization

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<sup>540</sup> Chae-jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: U.S. Policy and the Two Koreas* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006): 68.

<sup>541</sup> See Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, January 29, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 121-122.

<sup>542</sup> Secretary of State William Rogers stated that he, Laird, and others in the Nixon administration made hints regarding future US troop withdrawals that Park chose to ignore. Telegram from the Department of State, April 23, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 150-151.

program would weaken his domestic position. He then asked for the United States to delay its decision for another five years.<sup>543</sup>

Park repeated this argument for several months with other American officials. Some of these officials disliked his “hard line resistance” and his “lack of sensitivity to American domestic problems bearing on this matter.”<sup>544</sup> Yet these officials also expressed a lack of understanding of the South Korean position. During one high-level meeting, Park argued that the troop withdrawal appeared inconsistent with earlier American assurances over South Korean security. Ambassador Porter responded that “from our point of view [the South Korean government] seems to lack confidence in US intentions and our statements, and we do not understand why.”<sup>545</sup> Even worse, some efforts to allay South Korean concerns backfired. In an August 1970 press conference held in Seoul, Vice President Spiro Agnew deepened the uncertainty when he declared his government's intention to withdraw *all* American troops from the peninsula within five years.<sup>546</sup> Thus, in December 1970, South Korean Prime Minister Jong Pil Kim told Kissinger that “everyone in Korea understood [the withdrawal] meant a detachment of the US commitment to support [South] Korea and in effect the re-establishment of an Asian defense system.”<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, May 29, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 154-155. In a June 1970 letter intended for Nixon, Park reiterated the domestic difficulties of accepting the troop reductions: “On my part, it would be impossible to persuade the Korean people to accept the partial withdrawal by the end of June 1971, as mentioned in your letter, because of the unexpected shock it would give to them and the shortness of time involved.” Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, June 15, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 161. The so-called Brown Memorandum of 1966 assured South Korean leaders that an American modernization assistance program was forthcoming. A Korean-language source notes that “President Park felt great distrust when the result of the Brown Memorandum produced no significant outcome despite the fact that South Korea dispatched more than two infantry divisions to Vietnam.” See Oh Won-Chul, *Pakjonghi-wa Kimilsung-ui Ogissaum* [The Contest of Guts between Park Chung-hee and Kim Il-sung], ShinDongA (June 1996), 482. Translation thanks to research assistance.

<sup>544</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, June 1, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 158.

<sup>545</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, August 4, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 174-179.

<sup>546</sup> Kim, “Security,” 55.

<sup>547</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, December 2, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 216. This unease reflected Park's views on the origins of the Korean War. In his memoirs, first published in 1963, he wrote: “our relationship with the US can be traced back since the dawn of our independence. We share a common ground of upholding democratic values, military tradition, and principles of economy. We are also bonded by a common fate, that is the Korean War, and needless to say, how the victors of the WWII are responsible for it.” Park Chung-hee, *Kukga-wa Hyokmyung-gwa Na* [State, Revolution and Me] (Seoul, South Korea:

The partial withdrawal was not the only reason why South Korea became apprehensive of American security guarantees. First, the United States was scaling down its military presence all across East Asia in light of its military failure in Indochina. Second, American efforts at pursuing rapprochement with China created further unease over the future role that the United States would play in East Asia. Due to growing cleavages over communist doctrine and foreign policy interests, relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated to the point where Mao saw the United States as a lesser threat than its erstwhile ally. The Sino-Soviet split afforded the United States an opportunity to tilt the balance of power further against the Soviet Union. Nixon recognized the growing need to reach out to the Chinese in a 1967 *Foreign Affairs* piece that he had written as a Presidential candidate.<sup>548</sup> Shortly after becoming President, Nixon used secure diplomatic channels to advance this initiative.<sup>549</sup> Though a pragmatic policy change for the United States, South Korean leaders felt threatened by the prospect of American rapprochement with China.<sup>550</sup> Specifically, they were worried that the United States would grant the Chinese greater leeway in East Asia and accept its request for the American withdrawal from Korea.<sup>551</sup> Indeed, the American partial withdrawal likely magnified South Korean unease over the American pursuit of rapprochement with China.<sup>552</sup>

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Chiguchon, 1997 [originally published by Hyangmunsa, 1963]: 227-31. Translation thanks to research assistance.

<sup>548</sup> Richard M. Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1967): 113-125.

<sup>549</sup> Memorandum from President Nixon to his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), February 1, 1969, FRUS 1969-72 27: 7.

<sup>550</sup> Park Chung-hee did use the occasion to consolidate his political rule further. See Lyong Choi, *The Foreign Policy of Park Chunghee, 1968-1978* (PhD dissertation: London School of Economics, 2012): 92-97.

<sup>551</sup> Kim, "Security," 55. The South Korean Foreign Ministry did make official statements regarding how American accommodation of China might encourage the Chinese to restrain North Korea. See Lee, *A Troubled Peace*, 71. The South Korean government conveyed its apprehensions regarding rapprochement ahead of Nixon's visit to China. Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, December 13, 1971, FRUS 1969-72 19: 302-305; Memorandum from John H. Holdridge of the National Security Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), February 12, 1972, FRUS 1969-1972 19: 316-317.

<sup>552</sup> A Korean-language secondary source observes: "[o]n the surface, South Korean government reacted positively towards the rapprochement negotiation between the United States and China and expressed its hope for easing of tension in the Korean peninsula, but internally, many were concerned that the Taiwan issue, China's request for the withdrawal of the US forces in Korea, and negotiation regarding the Vietnam war would be brought up during the discussion. This concern was exemplified when the US did not inform the schedule of the meeting with the Chinese to the South Korean government." See Kim Yong-Sik,

In the absence of direct evidence, some readers might be unsatisfied of the connection between American partial withdrawals and South Korean nuclear activities. Yet other aspects of South Korean foreign policy at this time are worth considering since the ally could also respond to its concerns over American security guarantees with other actions that seem retaliatory or vindictive.

Consider the following set of policies enacted by South Korea that seem rooted in a desire to complicate American efforts to change its regional force posture. To begin with, the documentary record is replete with examples of South Korean leaders seeking new reassurances from the United States. These requests were particularly salient when officials representing South Korea and the United States discussed modernization programs for the South Korean military. Specifically, they desired greater American support for the modernization of the South Korean military and stronger assurances regarding American security commitments. Oftentimes these goals were explicitly linked: Park wanted American deployments to remain unchanged until the South Korean military was sufficiently modernized.<sup>553</sup> Yet these demands elicited a mixed response from the United States. In addition to the finality of the troop withdrawal plans, American decision-makers sent mixed signals about expanding military assistance to South Korea. For example, in a letter to Park intended to placate the South Korean leader's concerns about American security commitments, Nixon wrote of the significant domestic pressure he faced to reallocate burdens among allies. He noted that “the level of military assistance for Korea provided by the Congress (sic) under the last military assistance appropriation has been less than we considered desirable.” This explanation did not deter Nixon from adding that “[s]ubject to Congressional approval, I propose to provide substantially higher military assistance over the period 1971–75 for Korean modernization. Moreover provided your Government assumes a larger defense burden we are also prepared to consider some increased economic assistance.”<sup>554</sup> In effect, Nixon was promising more of something he already had trouble obtaining. Thus, it is

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*Huimang-gwa Tojon-Kim Yongsik Oegyohoegorok* [Hope and Challenge: Memoir of Kim Yong-sik's Diplomacy] (Seoul, South Korea: Dong-A Ilbo sa, 1987): 246. Translation thanks to research assistance.

<sup>553</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, June 15, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 159-161. See also Telegram from the Commander in Chief, Pacific (McCain) to the Department of State, July 23, 1970, FRUS 1969-1972 19: 170-173.

<sup>554</sup> Letter from President Nixon to Korean President Park, May 26, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 152-154.}

unsurprising that Park later asked Ambassador Porter for greater clarification regarding the “nature and extent of modernization” of South Korean military forces.<sup>555</sup> Park even threatened non-cooperation in reduction talks should negotiations over South Korean military modernization prove to be unsatisfactory.<sup>556</sup> The desire for stronger assurances constituted a major theme in South Korea’s diplomacy towards the United States just as it began considering nuclear weapons research.

South Korea’s desire for stronger assurances persisted throughout the year. Interestingly, its diplomacy softened shortly after the establishment of ADD and WEC in August 1970.<sup>557</sup> The most palatable change took place in early November when, following a presentation by Porter on the status of troop withdrawals and the military modernization package, Park appeared “acquiescent.”<sup>558</sup> He even “abandon[ed] efforts to obtain diplomatic assurances regarding US troop reductions.” Rogers thus observed that “[h]e has probably realized that there is no chance that we will reconsider our positions and that further adamancy on his part could cost him heavily with both our Congress and the Korean electorate. Whatever the reasons for Park’s apparent acquiescence, the result is entirely favorable.”<sup>559</sup> The explanations put forward by members of the Department of State seem plausible, but it is also likely that Park recognized American resolve to implement these troop withdrawals.

This new understanding that the two allies reached did not ease their relations, however. As the date for implementing the troop withdrawals approached in early 1971, American government officials complained of the South Korean government’s “delaying

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<sup>555</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, May 29, 1970, FRUS 1969-1972 19: 154-155.

<sup>556</sup> Park told Ambassador Porter that “[i]f United States (sic) proceeds to reduce he will not object but he will not cooperate ... Perhaps it would be said that [the South Korean government] is uncooperative and intransigent but same holds true for United States because [the South Korean government] was not consulted in advance of this decision and must have assurances.” Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, August 4, 1970. FRUS 1969-72 19: 174-179.

<sup>557</sup> At minimum, documents show a change in the tenor of South Korea’s *démarche*. See, e.g., Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, October 26, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 185-189.

<sup>558</sup> Porter hypothesized that domestic opposition and Congressional pressure might have generated this change in behavior. Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, November 7, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 193-194.

<sup>559</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon, November 10, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 197-198.

tactics” in deploying replacement troops along the DMZ.<sup>560</sup> Ironically, South Korea began implementing its own troop withdrawals from South Vietnam.<sup>561</sup> This action frustrated American officials for some of the same reasons expressed by the South Korean government in 1970. Ambassador Porter’s successor stated that he “requested [the South Korean government] not move suddenly with decisions or announcements of further withdrawals. [Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs Yun Sok-Hon] said that they had no intention of making known their plans at this time. I reminded him I had already seen articles in newspapers, sourced to officials, that his government was planning withdrawals in ’72 and mentioning [the South Vietnamese government’s] request for their retention. It struck me this kind of loose talk was not helpful. He agreed but did not leave with any assurance it would cease.”<sup>562</sup> Furthermore, South Korea resumed its efforts to extract even more assurances from the United States.<sup>563</sup> Despite Park’s alleged acquiescence in the fall of 1970, he remained a troublesome ally.

### **The Effort to End the Secret Nuclear Program**

The United States detected the nascent program by the end of 1974. In November 1974, it was aware that South Korea was acquiring a type of Canadian nuclear reactor that “was most vulnerable to clandestine diversion.” Nevertheless, a NSC memorandum expressed satisfaction over the safeguards implemented on American- and Canadian-supplied nuclear facilities to South Korea.<sup>564</sup> Indeed, an internal Department of State

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<sup>560</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, February 2, 1971, FRUS 1969-72 19: 224.

<sup>561</sup> South Korean decision-makers previously believed that their participation in the Vietnam War would ensure a sustained American military presence. As one Korean language secondary source argues, “the government (of South Korea) was aware of the effects of Nixon Doctrine, and calculated that any discussions leading to downsizing of the US troops would happen after the end of the Vietnam War ... The government thought by committing more than two infantry divisions to Vietnam (about the same size as the US forces in Korea), withdrawal of the US troops from South Korea would not occur.” Kim Jung-ryum, *Hangukgyongjegonsol 30 nyonsa: Kim Jongryom Hoegorok* [History of Korean Economic Construction for Thirty Years: Memoir] (Seoul, South Korea: Joongang Ilbosa, 1995): 316.

<sup>562</sup> Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, November 3, 1971, FRUS 1969-72 19: 290-293. Ultimately, South Korea agreed to postpone its withdrawals. Memorandum From John H. Holdridge of the NSC Staff to the President’s Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), February 5, 1972, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 315-316.

<sup>563</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, September 28, 1971, FRUS 1969-72 19: 282-285; Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, December 22, 1971, FRUS 1969-72 19: 307-311; and Letter From President Nixon to Korean President Park, May 19, 1972, FRUS 1969-72 19: 351-353.

<sup>564</sup> The same memorandum highlighted a loophole in American civilian nuclear agreements with South Korea. The recentness of the Indian ‘peaceful nuclear explosion’ (PNE) raised concerns that South Korea

memorandum circulated in October 1974 on South Korea made no mention of a nuclear weapons program.<sup>565</sup> However, a telegram sent two months later from the American embassy in Seoul alerted the Secretary of State of South Korea's nuclear activities.<sup>566</sup> It added that “evidence accumulated that the [South] Korean [government] has decided to proceed with the initial phases of a nuclear weapons program.” By February 28, 1975, the NSC agreed with the embassy’s assessment and asserted that South Korea's nuclear activities would have a “major destabilizing effect on the region.”<sup>567</sup>

With knowledge of the nuclear program, the Ford administration directed a counterproliferation effort against South Korea.<sup>568</sup> The strategy underpinning this effort focused on achieving four objectives. The first objective was to force the termination of the South Korean nuclear program “through unilateral US action and through the development of common supplier nation policies.” The second objective was to resolve informational issues and force South Korea to become more transparent in its uses of nuclear material. Greater transparency helped to advance a third objective: ensuring that South Korea could not restart its nuclear weapons program at a future date when the current controversy subsided. The fourth objective concerned the very issue that prompted the nuclear program in the first place. The United States had to allay skepticism over the reliability of its security commitments.<sup>569</sup>

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would divert plutonium “specifically for PNE use.” NSC Memorandum for General Scowcroft, “Sale of Canadian Nuclear Reactor to South Korea,” November 18, 1974, folder: “Korea (?),” Box 5, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

<sup>565</sup> Memorandum for Lieutenant General Brent Scowcroft, October 19, 1974, folder: “Korea (4),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

<sup>566</sup> Department of State Telegram, “ROK Plans to Develop Nuclear Weapons and Missiles,” December 1974, folder: “Korea (1),” same box as previous citation.

<sup>567</sup> Memorandum for Secretary Kissinger, February 28, 1975, folder: “Korea (4),” same box as previous citation.

<sup>568</sup> Memoirs and recent biographies of President Gerald R. Ford offer very little mention of South Korea and no mentioning of South Korea's nuclear weapons activities. See e.g., Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005). Ford only indicates in his autobiography that he assured Park that “our troops would stay where they were” in a meeting held in November 1974. He then describes how he encouraged Park to improve his human rights record. See Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1979): 212-213.

Kissinger says nothing about the South Korean nuclear weapons program in *White House Years*, *Years of Upheaval*, and *Years of Renewal*. The timing of these memoirs likely produced this silence.

<sup>569</sup> See also Telegram 2685 From the Embassy in the Republic of Korea to the Department of State, April 18, 1975, FRUS 1973-76 E-12.

To obtain the first objective, the Ford administration threatened to cut off financing for the Kori nuclear power plant and other planned nuclear facilities through the Export-Import Bank, the American export credit agency. Sneider reported that he had asked a South Korean official “whether Korea [is] prepared [to] jeopardize availability of technology and largest financing capability which only US could offer, as well as vital partnership with US, not only in nuclear and scientific areas but in broad political and security areas.”<sup>570</sup> Furthermore, the United States applied pressure to third-party states to stop them from lending sensitive nuclear assistance to South Korea. The Canadian government was attuned to the risk of proliferation following India’s nuclear test and had already faced severe criticism for supplying a repressive state with nuclear technology. After some wrangling, France agreed to withdraw its assistance to South Korea’s efforts in obtaining a reprocessing capability. Belgonucléaire terminated its contract with South Korea in November 1977.<sup>571</sup>

As for the second objective, the United States pressured South Korea to participate in a multilateral initiative that would enable East Asian states to reprocess spent fuel from a shared regional facility. For the third (and related) objective, getting the South Korean government to ratify the NPT was a significant step in addressing the issue of making a credible commitment to eschew nuclear weapons acquisition.<sup>572</sup> The Department of Defense agreed with this assessment, stating that “President Park’s fears of isolation and the possible withdrawal of American forces have led him to embark on a secret program to develop nuclear weapons.”<sup>573</sup> Indeed, the American embassy in Seoul noted the importance of South Korean perceptions of American security commitments ahead of a visit by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller:

Existing danger to [South Korea] has been greatly increased by communist successes in sea. [South Korean] security rests heavily on deterrent effect US force presence and military assistance provide. Any indication of

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<sup>570</sup> Quoted in Don Orberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001): 72.

<sup>571</sup> Kim, “Security,” 66.

<sup>572</sup> Draft Department of State Cable, “ROK Plans to Develop Nuclear Weapons and Missiles,” February 24, 1975, folder: “Korea (4),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

<sup>573</sup> Study Prepared by the Office of International Security Affairs in the Department of Defense, undated, FRUS 1973-76 E-12.

lessening of US commitment will encourage already dangerous North Korean belligerence. Decline of military assistance below levels earlier agreed and criticism in US on [South Korea] have already created concern over US intentions towards its commitments.<sup>574</sup>

NSC member William R. Smyser even circulated an old internal memorandum to Kissinger that outlined the decision-making behind the 1949 American troop withdrawal from South Korea. In the letter explaining this document, Smyser noted that “it is worth reflecting on this, for the obvious reason that we might not have had the Korean War if we had not pulled all of our forces out.”<sup>575</sup>

Such sensitivity regarding troop withdrawals now informed American policy-making towards South Korea and the region. For example, the Department of Defense considered additional restructuring of troop deployments on the peninsula. Yet members of the Department of State and the Ford administration resisted the Department of Defense’s policy recommendations. In a memorandum to Ford, Kissinger advised that “this is the wrong time to make any of these changes, or even to continue planning already underway with [South Korea] for such changes. To proceed would give the wrong signal to both Seoul and Pyongyang.”<sup>576</sup> Ford apparently agreed. In a note addressed to the Secretary of Defense, Kissinger stated that proposed changes to American force deployments and structure in South Korea were presently “inadvisable.”<sup>577</sup>

### **Explaining the Swiftmess of the Counterproliferation Effort**

The American counterproliferation effort appears to have succeeded in curtailing South Korea's nuclear ambitions. Admittedly, one reason is that the program was at such an early stage of development that it was relatively easy to cancel. Not enough progress and

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<sup>574</sup> Department of State Telegram, “Vice President's Meeting with ROK Prime Minister Kim Chong-Pil,” April 1975, folder: “Korea – State Department Telegrams: From SECSTATE to NODIS (3),” Box 11, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

<sup>575</sup> Memorandum for Secretary Kissinger, March 5, 1975, folder: “Korea (5),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

<sup>576</sup> Memorandum for President Ford, April, 1975?, folder: “Korea (6),” same box as previous citation.

<sup>577</sup> Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, undated, same folder and box as previous citation. That American decision-makers themselves saw the linkage between troop redeployments and South Korea’s nuclear program also builds confidence for my theory. They may be relying on private insights drawn from information that remains unavailable in the documentary record.

investment was made for South Korea to be so attached to it. Another reason for its success was the economic asymmetry between the United States and South Korea. As political scientist Etel Solingen notes, almost all of the foreign direct investment in South Korea came from the United States and Japan. The United States accounted for a majority of South Korea's debt and trade.<sup>578</sup> However, it was arguably less the application of economic statecraft that mattered as it was the specific targeting of South Korea's nascent civilian nuclear industry. South Korean energy dependency and the structure of the international nuclear industry at the time were other reasons for the rapid success of American counterproliferation efforts. Due to the quick pace of its industrialization, existing energy sources available to South Korea were increasingly unable to meet demand. South Korean coal imports and petroleum imports both grew twenty-fold between 1960 and 1975. Accordingly, South Korea's dependence on imported energy grew from less than ten percent to over fifty percent by the early 1970s.<sup>579</sup> Nuclear energy provided a remedy for this situation. Still, the United States exercised a dominant role in the international nuclear industry. Its nuclear reactors were the most appropriate and cost efficient in light of South Korean needs. Because these reactors required low-enriched uranium, the United States supplied the vast majority of uranium on the world market, especially if one were to exclude the Soviet Union and China.<sup>580</sup> This dependency meant that South Korea was extraordinarily sensitive to the possibility that its access to peaceful American nuclear technology during the 1970s would be denied. Simply put, South Korea was susceptible to American pressure.

In compelling South Korea to behave more favorably, the United States still had to offer some concessions. After all, even though South Korea succumbed to American pressure to ratify the NPT, its leadership made it clear that its future nuclear weapons-related behavior would be a function of the strength of American security commitments. Such statements imply that South Korea was willing to compromise on its economic objectives if its security needs would not be satisfactorily met. Thus, as already discussed, the Ford administration refrained from opening any discussions of further troop

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<sup>578</sup> Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, 90-91.

<sup>579</sup> Young-sun Ha, *Nuclear Proliferation, World Order, and Korea* (Seoul, South Korea: Seoul National University Press, 1983): 234.

<sup>580</sup> Drezner, *The Sanctions Paradox*, 260-261.

withdrawals. Key officials verbally communicated their commitment to South Korean security as well as offered sophisticated military hardware to strengthen the South Korean military.<sup>581</sup> An opportunity to demonstrate American military support came when North Korean soldiers killed two United States Army officers who were cutting down an obstructive poplar tree in the DMZ. Operation Paul Bunyan, as this effort was called, consisted of a convoy of military vehicles (supported by nearby helicopters, bombers, and jet aircraft) entering the DMZ without warning in order to cut down the tree.<sup>582</sup>

To be sure, American decision-makers expressed such reassurances at a time when American credibility in the region was otherwise at its nadir. On April 12, 1975, the United States airlifted its nationals and members of the American-supported military-led government out of Cambodia. This action paved the way for the communist Khmer Rouge to obtain control of Cambodia and thus end that country's civil war. At the very end of the month, the People's Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front captured Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. The capture of Saigon not only prompted the evacuation of most American civilian and military personnel from the city, but also enabled the Provisional Revolutionary Government to gain nominal authority in South Vietnam. American losses in the region did not stop there: communist forces began acquiring significant control in Laos, another country whose government was supported by the United States. With these losses occurring in rapid succession, American decision-makers, such as Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Schlesinger, recognized that the international stature and reputation for resolve of the United States were now diminished.<sup>583</sup>

Contrary to some accounts of the case, American decision-makers did not in fact threaten complete abandonment should South Korea proceed with a nuclear weapons program. The supporting evidence for such a threat is in Don Oberdorfer's *The Two*

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<sup>581</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, August 26, 1975, folder: "Korea (12)," Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL. Meeting with Korean National Assemblymen, June 25, 1975, folder: "Korea (10)," same box as previous citation.

<sup>582</sup> Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011): 59-66.

<sup>583</sup> Indeed, such concerns likely motivated the forceful (but clumsy) response undertaken by the United States to rescue the SS *Mayaguez* and its American crew from Khmer Rouge forces. *New York Times*, May 16, 1975, at. 1, col. 6.

*Koreas*. Oberdorfer writes that in 1976 diplomats Sneider and Habbib threatened to terminate all American security guarantees to the East Asian ally unless it credibly committed not to proliferate. He also adds that in May 1976 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told the South Korean Minister of Defense that there might be a “review of the entire spectrum of [the United States’] relations with the ROK.”<sup>584</sup> If true, then these statements would challenge my argument. For one, if abandonment fears prompted South Korea to have a nuclear program in the first place, then explicit American threats to abandon the alliance completely should have deepened South Korea's inclination to develop nuclear weapons. For another, I argue that security guarantors need to repair their broken security guarantees in order to curb nuclear interest. Such threats are inappropriate for this necessity. However, the threats described above are vague and do not contain explicit warnings that the alliance would be abrogated. Other alliance goods were perhaps at stake but not the alliance itself. The source of a Rumsfeld threat is an interview with a Korean source dated in 1995 in the *Monthly Chosun* and so should not be taken as definitive.<sup>585</sup> No documentary evidence shows that American decision-makers ever delivered an unambiguous threat linking South Korean nuclear weapons activities to the termination of the alliance. This should not be surprising: threats of alliance termination would have been counterproductive if they were credible.

### **Carter’s Attempted Troop Withdrawal**

Emerging developments in American politics threatened the Ford administration's success with South Korea's nuclear program. The economic crisis and continuing fallout from the Watergate scandal doomed Ford's presidential bid in the 1976 election. His Democratic replacement, Jimmy Carter, entered the White House with a new vision for foreign policy that centered on human rights advocacy. Consistent with this approach, Carter found American support for a repressive regime like Park's South Korea distasteful.<sup>586</sup> During the Democratic primary campaign, Carter even promised the

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<sup>584</sup> Oberdorfer, *Two Koreas*, 58-59

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid*, 479,

<sup>586</sup> 100 Congressmen signed a petition renouncing human rights violations in South Korea during the Ford presidency. Indeed, Koreagate—a Congressional effort at critically probing the American-South Korean alliance—added further strain to the relationship between the two countries. For a summary of these Congressional debates, see Han Sungjoo, “South Korea and the United States: The Alliance Survives,”

complete withdrawal of all American military forces from the Korean peninsula. Such early campaign rhetoric turned out to reflect Carter's true intentions for South Korea.<sup>587</sup> 39,000 American troops still remained in South Korea in 1977, but Carter sought to reduce that number to zero shortly after assuming the presidency. He directed the NSC to produce a feasibility report regarding the implementation of a complete troop withdrawal from South Korea. Being so committed to this initiative, the White House did not even wish for an analysis of its probable consequences.<sup>588</sup>

Carter's position provoked a backlash from leading officials in the military, the NSC, and the Department of State. The chief of staff of the UN Command in Seoul even spoke publicly against Carter's proposal. Though less open about their own attitudes, the senior American commander in South Korea and the American ambassador in Seoul also opposed further troop withdrawals. An official privy to these internal debates later wrote that the NSC sought to persuade Carter to modify his position. Apparently, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown privately recommended a softer policy position. These efforts came to naught as Carter ignored the advice of other senior decision-makers and proceeded to issue Presidential Decision 12 on May 5, 1977. This statement called for the complete withdrawal of all troops by 1982, starting with one brigade of the second division (at least 6,000 troops) to be removed from South Korea by late 1978.<sup>589</sup>

International opposition towards the planned troop withdrawal grew during the summer of 1977. The Chinese Vice Foreign Minister cryptically told Australian government officials that “there will be war” after the American troop withdrawal. Though this statement was most likely not a reflection of the official Chinese position, it nevertheless communicated their unease over the larger geopolitical implications of this

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*Asian Survey*, vol. 20, no. 11 (1980): 1075–1086.

<sup>587</sup> William H. Gleysteen, *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999): 17. Other reasons account for Carter's proposed withdrawal policy. As Larry A. Niksch notes, the Carter administration sought to shift its foreign policy orientation away from East Asia and towards Europe in the wake of the Vietnam War. See *idem*, “U.S. Troop Withdrawal from South Korea: Past Shortcomings and Future Prospects,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1981): 325–27.

<sup>588</sup> Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-13, January 26, 1977, folder: “Presidential Review Memorandum (11-35)”, Box 105, Vertical File, Jimmy Carter Library (JCL).

<sup>589</sup> On the discord within the Carter administration, see Gleysteen, *Massive Entanglement*, 24.

change in the American military presence in East Asia.<sup>590</sup> After all, China saw the American military presence in East Asia as a desirable offset to Soviet encirclement, despite being forced to call for troop withdrawals as part of its ideological competition with the Soviet Union.<sup>591</sup> American East Asian allies also seemed concerned about the implications of the withdrawal for the “wellsprings of US foreign policy.” NSC staff member Mark Armacost noted after his trip to Asia that “[s]ince no concessions are being sought from [North Korea], most Asians conclude that diplomatic considerations got short shrift.” If military reasons did not account for the new policy, then only American “domestic politics” seemed to be the last remaining explanation that made sense for American allies.<sup>592</sup>

If the international and administration reactions were so negative, then what was the response of the South Korean government? Though Carter’s plans for a complete withdrawal never bore fruit, his strong intent to implement his desired policy might have prompted South Korea to pursue nuclear weapons development more furtively than before. According to Jonathan Pollack and Mitchell Reiss, South Korea worked on managing the nuclear fuel cycle during this time.<sup>593</sup> R. Scott Kemp provides evidence that South Korea even started a nuclear centrifuge program.<sup>594</sup> Though any such weapons research and development would have been highly secret, the Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister mooted the possibility of South Korea pursuing its own nuclear capability. Indeed, the Minister of Science and Technology—with the likely sanctioning of President Park—proclaimed the expansion of South Korea’s nuclear industry so as to domestically produce a fuel supply.<sup>595</sup> One source claims that Park announced in January 1977 his

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<sup>590</sup> Memorandum, July 20, 1977, folder: “(2),” Box 3, Brzezinski Material: President’s Daily Report File, JCL.

<sup>591</sup> At least, such was the assessment of American intelligence officials. See Intelligence Memorandum: The Value of the United States to China’s National Security, March 1977, folder: “3,” Box 54, Staff Material: Far East, JCL.

<sup>592</sup> Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, June 10, 1977, folder: “8,” Box 125, Brzezinski Material: Brzezinski Office File, JCL.

<sup>593</sup> Jonathan D. Pollack and Mitchell B. Reiss, “South Korea: The Tyranny of Geography and the Vexations of History,” in *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices*, eds. Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004): 263.

<sup>594</sup> Scott, *Nonproliferation*.

<sup>595</sup> Global economic conditions following the oil crisis provided additional impetus for the Minister of Science and Technology’s announcement. See Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, 93.

intention for South Korea not to go nuclear. Around this time, the South Korean Foreign Minister issued the vague threat that “if it is necessary for national security interests and people's safety, it is possible for Korea as a sovereign state to make its own judgment on the matter.”<sup>596</sup> Still, at a legislative committee meeting convened to discuss Carter's troop withdrawals, the South Korean Foreign Minister remarked that “[w]e have signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty and thus our basic position is that we do not intend to develop nuclear weapons by ourselves. But if it is necessary for national security interests and people's safety, it is possible for Korea as a sovereign state to make its own judgment on the matter.”<sup>597</sup>

Carter's plans for complete withdrawal renewed fears of alliance abandonment among South Korean leaders.<sup>598</sup> Interestingly, American officials anticipated such a response because they were aware of Park's desire to maintain the status quo. As one telegram observed, “convinced of the necessity for a credible expression of continuing US support as a deterrent to the North, [Park] has told us directly he wants close relations with the US, high-lighted by continuation of present US ground and other force levels.”<sup>599</sup> Nevertheless, within a few months, Ambassador Richard Sneider reported that Park and his government were “reconciled to ground troop withdrawal.” The challenge, however, concerned the question of how “to prepare its public.”<sup>600</sup> Sneider repeated this view two weeks later, adding that Park is “almost isolated” and “will press for satisfactory compensatory actions particularly on timing and availability of weapons.” He “will not resist ground force withdrawal despite his grave misgivings.” Still, the Ambassador now recognized that many members of the South Korean government did not share Park's attitudes. Sneider noted that “to many, the ground force withdrawal

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<sup>596</sup> Ha, “Nuclearization,” 1142.

<sup>597</sup> Young-sun Ha, “Nuclearization of Small States and World War: The Case of South Korea,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 18, no. 11 (1978): 1142. That said, when these statements were made, neither the United States nor the IAEA detected any major effort to develop nuclear weapons when these statements were made. See Drezner, *The Sanctions Paradox*, 265.

<sup>598</sup> Cha offers additional evidence of South Korean apprehensions following Carter's election. See Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, 149-152.

<sup>599</sup> Telegram From Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, February 7, 1977, folder: “(6)”, Box 39, Staff Material: Far East, JCL.

<sup>600</sup> Telegram from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, April 5, 1977, folder: “(1)”, Box 11, Brzezinski Material: Cables File, JCL.

connotes loss of US tripwire and with it loss of US military support in event of North Korean attack following withdrawal which is now broadly expected.”<sup>601</sup>

The announced troop withdrawal did provoke concern over whether South Korea would try to acquire nuclear weapons. The Carter administration had already decided that South Korean nuclear proliferation was so unacceptable that it would “terminate” the American alliance with South Korea in the event it would occur.<sup>602</sup> Yet South Korean attitudes towards the bomb were difficult to gauge. To the surprise of American diplomats, one worry expressed by their South Korean interlocutors touched on whether their country would still enjoy the benefits of American extended nuclear deterrence. As Snieder related:

In response to these suggestions of embracing Korea under US nuclear umbrella, I pointed out that in fact Korea, as any ally, would be covered by US nuclear umbrella and I was surprised that there was any misunderstanding on that point. Both Korean sources pointed out that Koreans have considered assumed (sic) stationing of nuclear weapons in Korea as providing them with nuclear protection. US in past has not talked specifically of placing Korea under nuclear umbrella but this was not considered necessary. However, with possibility of withdrawal of at least ground force nuclear weapons, Koreans suggested that we take some public posture vis-à-vis Korea as we do Japan with respect to nuclear umbrella.<sup>603</sup>

The American embassy in Seoul thus became acutely aware of the need to reassure South Korea of its received security guarantees. Snieder anticipated that South Korea would search for independent means of preserving its own security. Indeed, he noted that “one specific evidence of this concern is a continuing dialogue and heightened interest in the possibility of [South Korean] acquisition, as a means of bolstering [South Korean] self-reliance.”<sup>604</sup> A CIA report dated June 1978 states that “officials in the Korean nuclear research community believe that, even while bowing to US preferences on the line of

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<sup>601</sup> Telegram from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, April 19, 1977, folder: “(2)”, Box 2, Brzezinski Material: Staff Evening Reports File, JCL.

<sup>602</sup> Carter recommended that “Park should be told that any move to produce nuclear weapons would terminate our security relationship.” Memorandum of Conversation, May 21, 1977, folder: “5/16-23/77”, National Security Affairs, Staff Material: Far East, JCL.

<sup>603</sup> Telegram from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, June 13, 1977, folder: “(2)”, Box 11, Brzezinski Material: Cables File, JCL.

<sup>604</sup> Telegraph from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, October 21, 1977, folder: “(9)”, Box 144, National Security Affairs, Staff Material: Office, JCL.

work they pursue, certain activities can and should be undertaken to keep Seoul's nuclear option open."<sup>605</sup> That the South Korean government signed the NPT just two years before did not seem to allay these fears.<sup>606</sup>

The Carter administration eventually decided against the troop withdrawals. Yet this controversial policy had already inflicted much damage. Leading Democratic Congressmen such as Robert Byrd, Sam Nunn, and Tip O'Neill reproached the Carter administration for its handling of the planned troop withdrawals.<sup>607</sup> Sam Nunn was concerned with the proposed timing of the withdrawal as North Korean military forces appeared to be gathering strength.<sup>608</sup> The American military also had reservations. To the dismay of the NSC, the Department of Defense leaked politically sensitive Joint Chiefs of Staff cables to Congress in June 1977. The purpose of this action was likely to bolster Congressional opposition to Carter's initiative.<sup>609</sup> The probable actions of the South Korean government during this period also suggest a deep-seated unease over Carter's foreign policy. At a minimum, South Korea became a more difficult ally. When Carter explored the possibility of having a trilateral meeting with the two Koreas, one NSC member cautioned that "Park would not go along. There is little in such a meeting for him, unless we agreed to stop troop withdrawals entirely."<sup>610</sup> Even the Japanese government seemed relieved when the issue was finally resolved.<sup>611</sup>

If South Korea did engage in nuclear activities in the late 1970s, then it is highly plausible that Carter's stated intentions for a complete withdrawal had much to do with it. Park's earlier warnings about the consequences of a removal of the American nuclear umbrella cast a shadow over this episode. Gleysteen's account of bureaucratic infighting

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<sup>605</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "South Korea Nuclear Development and Strategic Decisionmaking," June 1978. I thank Robert Reardon for providing me this document.

<sup>606</sup> To be sure, South Korea did make efforts in surface-to-surface missile technology over the course of the 1970s, see Kim, "Security."

<sup>607</sup> Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, July 19, 1978, folder: "(25)", Box 13, Jimmy Carter Presidential, President's Files, Staff Secretary's File, JCL.

<sup>608</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, January 23, 1979, folder: "(2)", Box 37, Brzezinski Material: Subject File, JCL.

<sup>609</sup> Memorandum from Mike Armacost to Zbigniew Brzezinski, June 29, 1977, folder: "6/28-30/77", Box 2, National Security Affairs, Staff Material: Far East, JCL.

<sup>610</sup> Memorandum for Brzezinski, May 7, 1979, folder: "5/16-31/79", Box 67, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Far East, JCL.

<sup>611</sup> Memorandum for Brzezinski, October 9, 1979, folder: "(3)", Box 24, Brzezinski Material, Staff Evening Reports, JCL.

within the Carter administration over these planned troop withdrawals highlights how many American officials understood the implications of such an action for the American alliance with South Korea and regional stability in East Asia.<sup>612</sup>

### **Summary and Alternative Explanations**

The analysis of South Korea's record of nuclear interest demonstrates the primacy of alliance politics. The Nixon Doctrine entailed some shift of American conventional military resources away from East Asia. Its impact on South Korean security interests towards the region became manifest with Nixon's announced withdrawal of one troop division from the Korean peninsula. Documents show that the South Korean government reacted harshly to this change in American force posture. South Korean leaders, especially Park, responded by adopting a set of measures: they repeatedly sought verbal reassurances from their American interlocutors, they threatened to unilaterally withdraw South Korean troops from Vietnam, they engaged in foot-dragging to slow American withdrawal from the region, and, more importantly, they established the WEC and the ADD to oversee an eventual nuclear weapons program. Alliance politics also played an important role in the demise of the program. Had it not been for American pressure on South Korea and its international suppliers of nuclear assistance, South Korea might not have terminated its program when and how it did. Finally, despite uncertainty regarding the exact nature of South Korea's nuclear activities in the late 1970s, the evidence at least shows that South Korea reacted negatively to Carter's plans for complete withdrawal.

South Korea has come to represent a victory for American counterproliferation efforts. As early as October 1978, in a public speech outlining the proliferation risks of reprocessing, President Ford identified South Korea (and Taiwan) as two countries where the United States forced the cancellation of local reprocessing activities.<sup>613</sup> Nevertheless, despite its multi-pronged strategy, we should not overstate the counterproliferation campaign mounted by the Ford administration for the simple reason that not much of a nuclear weapons program was in place at the time. Consider a 1978 intelligence estimate

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<sup>612</sup> Gleysteen, *Massive Entanglement*.

<sup>613</sup> President Gerald R. Ford, "Statement on Nuclear Policy," October 28, 1976. Available online: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6561>.

that reviews the history of the program: “[b]eginning in late 1972, physicists assisted by an explosives technician had worked on a nuclear weapon design at the [ADD], a semi-independent adjunct of the Ministry of National Defense.”<sup>614</sup> The technical difficulties encountered early by these researchers indicate the massive challenges that South Korea confronted in seeking nuclear weapons. It depended so much on foreign suppliers of the technologies necessary for this initiative. One can take the argument even further and contend that South Korea represented low hanging fruit for the Ford administration at a time when some nonproliferation success was desperately needed. After all, the Indian ‘peaceful nuclear explosion’—made possible by a Canadian reactor and American heavy water—rocked the nonproliferation community at a time when the Nonproliferation Treaty still seemed weak.<sup>615</sup> And even so, South Korea still committed safeguard violations throughout the 1980s. These violations involved experiments to separate plutonium and enrich uranium. Thus, in some ways, South Korea was the easy case, but it still posed problems for American counterproliferation efforts.<sup>616</sup>

These observations aside, the evidence so far accords with my theory. Nevertheless, I examine the leading alternative explanations below.

### *The Adversary Thesis*

One counterargument is that South Korea responded primarily to the threat posed by adversaries rather than unfavorable changes in American security guarantees. North Korea certainly intensified its provocations in the late 1960s. However, it had long maintained a threatening posture under Kim Il-sung’s leadership. China, North Korea’s patron, also exhibited aggressive behavior throughout the decade, including border clashes with India and the 1964 detonation of its own nuclear weapon. Instead, I argue that these threats were necessary but insufficient for South Korea’s nuclear interest. The salience of regional threats made the announcement of American troop withdrawals even

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<sup>614</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “South Korea Nuclear Development and Strategic Decisionmaking,” June 1978: 6.

<sup>615</sup> George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001): 186-187.

<sup>616</sup> “IAEA: Seoul’s Nuclear Sins in Past,” *Arms Control Today*, December 1, 2004. Available online: <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/1714> (last accessed February 13, 2016).

more alarming. Abandonment fears, rather than the threats alone, led South Korea to engage in nuclear statecraft.<sup>617</sup>

Changes in South Korea's threat environment also cannot account for South Korea's renunciation of nuclear weapons. In fact, the threat environment facing South Korea did not wane in intensity. Direct evidence of how South Korean leaders understood the regional security environment is difficult to ascertain so as to evaluate this theory properly. Still, enough reasons exist to doubt the validity of this hypothesis. First, the South Koreans were still anxious over the broader repercussions of communist successes in Indochina. They worried that the subsequent American withdrawal might even embolden regional adversaries. Second, North Korea retained an aggressive posture and even made preparations for war. Kim Il-sung even toured China and Eastern Europe to make weapons and fuel purchases. Accordingly, "President Park believed that war could break out at any time."<sup>618</sup>

Moreover, South Korea's diplomatic relations with Japan were seriously strained after a North Korean sympathizer attempted to assassinate Park in August 1974, fatally injuring the South Korean president's wife in the process. Because the would-be assassin was Japanese and entered South Korea on a Japanese passport, Park demanded an apology and the disbandment of a pro-North Korean residents' association. Insensitive to anti-Japanese sentiments in South Korea, the Japanese Foreign Minister further antagonized the South Korean leadership by refusing to accept any responsibility for the attack. Though these governments eventually settled this controversy, the strain on their diplomatic relations added to an already conflict-ridden regional environment.<sup>619</sup> Considered together, tensions in the region remained sufficiently high to warrant the continuation of a nuclear weapons program.

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<sup>617</sup> Moreover, North Korea moderated its diplomacy towards South Korea during the years between 1970 and 1972. Nevertheless, the problem of troop withdrawals is that they might offer a 'window of opportunity' for an adversary to exploit. Still, some domestic opponents of Park, most notably Kim Dae-jung, argued that the South Korean president deliberately exaggerated the threat to bolster his political legitimacy. Memorandum of Conversation, February 1, 1972, FRUS 1969-72 19: 313-315.

<sup>618</sup> Kim, "Security," 64.

<sup>619</sup> Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, 52-54. As Jennifer Lind reports, the South Korean government still felt threatened by their erstwhile imperial rulers. This threat perception was based primarily on the Japanese government's reluctance to satisfactorily atone for its historical crimes and abuses against Korean society. See Lind, "Apologies," 538-540.

An instructive irony exists in the case of South Korea. In the late 1960s, American conventional deterrence against North Korea was failing so much so as to provoke the ire of Park. After the Blue House Raid, he was unnerved by Johnson's reluctance to issue a military response against North Korea. He voiced his frustrations to the former Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance. In a memorandum to Johnson, Vance noted:

Highly emotional volatile, frustrated and introspective, Park wanted to obtain from me a pledge for the United States to join his Government in instant, punitive, and retaliatory actions against North Korea in the event of another Blue House raid or comparable attack on some other important South Korean economic, governmental, or military facility. He wanted my assurance of an 'automatic' US response in the event of another serious raid against the ROK. I refused to give any such assurances.

Park partially blamed the United States for the Blue House Raid itself. After all, North Korean forces had to sneak behind the American forces that were positioned along the DMZ.<sup>620</sup> Nevertheless, this record of deterrence failure was insufficient for pushing Park Chung-hee to start a nuclear weapons program. The real push came when the United States weakened its conventional deterrent even when the number of tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula remained unchanged. The adversary-centric thesis cannot explain why South Korea would seek nuclear weapons following conventional military reductions when the presence of tactical nuclear weapons remained constant.

### *The Coalition Thesis*

A weakness of the coalition thesis is that Park sought nuclear weapons despite his export-oriented economic program. Economic strategies mattered to the extent that the South Korean state's management of the economy and ties to industry facilitated efforts to marshal national resources towards the production of nuclear weapons. Still, some scholars like Etel Solingen argued that Park capitulated to American counterproliferation demands in order to preserve domestic economic development. Specifically, because economic development more directly affected his political survival, Park renounced the nuclear weapons project openly and made nonproliferation commitments. After all, as

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<sup>620</sup> Despite articulating these criticisms, Vance and Park reiterated their countries' Vietnam War and alliance commitments, respectively. Memorandum from Cyrus R. Vance to President Johnson, February 20, 1968, FRUS 1964-68 29: 384-391.

Solingen argues, “suspicions about South Korea’s nuclear intentions had to be put to rest if the export-led growth strategy was to have any chance.”<sup>621</sup> The alliance with the United States did matter, but only insofar as it provided the locus of South Korea’s strategy for economic development.

This argument has other shortcomings. I should state at the outset that I agree with Solingen that, for a state dependent on the United States for its economic success, South Korea was very sensitive to positive and negative economic inducements. American economic sanctions succeeded because South Korea depended on its economic relationship with the United States to satisfy its developmental objectives. The problem with her account is that at times Park was willing to compromise his own preferred model of economic development when alliance commitments appeared uncertain. Indeed, if Park valued economic development so much, it is unclear why he risked compromising it by having a nuclear weapons program in the first place. Although the program was secret, its usefulness as a deterrent required that the South Korean government would eventually need to become more open about its nuclear activities.

Little evidence exists to show that economics motivated Park more than alliance considerations. To support the assertion that Park renounced nuclear weapons to protect his country’s economic development, Solingen cites a quote by Park in which he argues in favor of “doing away with those activities that tend to drain or waste our natural resources in a broad sense.”<sup>622</sup> She adds that “even after North Korea assassinated Park’s wife in 1974, he continued to focus on the synergies between South Korea’s economic vitality, regional stability, and a positive ‘recognition in the world community.’”<sup>623</sup> These passages are problematic for several reasons. The problem with the first statement by Park is that it is unclear to which specific “activities” he is referring. Wasteful activities could conceivably encompass anything from bureaucratic red tape to inefficient production. Moreover, even if it did refer to the nuclear weapons program, the statement might be an example of post facto rationalization. In marshaling various sectors of the economy towards nuclear research, Park's nuclear interest suggests that for several years

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<sup>621</sup> Solingen, *Nuclear Logics*, 90.

<sup>622</sup> Park quoted in *ibid*, 93.

<sup>623</sup> This passage, drawn from *ibid*, includes a quote by Park.

he did not regard such activity as a 'waste.' The problem with the second statement regarding Park's behavior following his wife's murder is that the historical record does not support it. The assassination by a North Korean sympathizer from Japan intensified existing tensions between South Korea and Japan. Park even mobilized large anti-Japanese protests in Seoul to demonstrate his country's dissatisfaction with the Japanese position on the incident.<sup>624</sup> These actions were inconsistent with any stated desire to advance regional stability and obtain positive international recognition.

Another weakness with the coalition thesis is that the South Korean government did not wean itself away from the global economy. To the contrary, it sought to develop export industries. Self-reliance meant less of the economic self-sufficiency implied by the term 'autarchy' and more of technological advancement.<sup>625</sup> Statist economic management affected South Korea's nuclear statecraft insofar as it facilitated the implementation of the nuclear weapons program. With the establishment of ADD and WEC, the South Korean management of the economy and state ties to industry facilitated efforts to marshal national resources towards the production of nuclear weapons.

Another counterargument is that nationalist drives for autonomy motivated South Korean leaders. According to Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, South Korea's nuclear projects in the late 1960s and 1970s were rooted in government initiatives for "the modernization of the fatherland" and a "self-reliant economy." They point to the nationalist rhetoric that extolled the achievements of scientists and engineers working on nuclear energy.<sup>626</sup> Yet South Korea's nationalist rhetoric did not focus on defense matters until after North Korean provocations and Nixon's announcement of troop withdrawals from the peninsula. During the 1960s, the government's nationalist rhetoric was necessary

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<sup>624</sup> Orberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, 52-54.

<sup>625</sup> Accordingly, Park declared: "[t]he first step in accomplishing nationalistic democracy is to stand on our own feet. Self-reliance is the foundation of every democracies, and through self-reliance, we can retain our national identity. Without self-reliance, democracy and national identity mean nothing." On nationalism, he wrote: "[w]hat came from the outside—knowledge, ideology, political system—we must mend them to fit our unique environment and characteristics. This is what I call 'nationalism.'" Put differently, nationalism required the adaptation of externally generated ideas, institutions, and goods to serve the purposes of state and society. It did not entail closure to the outside world. Translated quote from Shim Yoong-Taek, *Jarip-e-ui uiji: Pak jonghi Daetongryong orok* [The Will for Self-Reliance: The Words of President Park Chung-hee] (Seoul, South Korea: Hanlim Ch'ulpansa, 1972): 228-34. Translation thanks to research assistance.

<sup>626</sup> Jasanoff and Kim, "Containing the Atom," 133.

for economic mobilization. Seung-Young Kim writes that Park promoted self-reliance in defense “to defend South Korea and to keep national dignity in the face of American meddling in South Korea's domestic affairs.”<sup>627</sup> Still, Nixon’s troop withdrawal arguably compromised Park's stated objectives for national self-reliance. As Ambassador Habbib noted:

Park’s view of self-reliance, paradoxically, includes a desire and an expressed need for the U.S. presence and assistance to continue—at least in the short run. His concern that we will reduce our aid program, withdraw our troops sooner than he would like, and his doubt over the firmness of our treaty commitment, come to the surface from time to time. Generally speaking, he wishes to hold on to these elements of strength for as long as he can, expecting they will diminish as time goes on.<sup>628</sup>

Park continued this line of argument with President Ford, asserting that “[o]f course, we do not expect the US presence to remain indefinitely, given the mounting US public opinion and pressure in Congress. However, Korean self-reliance must be insured before US troop reductions take place.”<sup>629</sup> Simply put, Park saw American protection as complementing, rather than constraining, self-reliance.

A nationalism-centered counterargument would also expect that leaders would resist, or even manipulate, foreign pressure to cement their nationalist legitimacy. As the leader of a repressive regime, Park had incentives to blame the United States and rally anti-foreign sentiment to boost his government's national security policies. In reality, Park was more circumspect in outlining his security objectives explicitly. Following the withdrawal of the American troop division, Park emphasized the urgency of obtaining national self-reliance in defense. At least publicly, these declarations did not explicitly iterate the need for an indigenous nuclear capability when South Korea first explored and then later pursued the nuclear weapons option. Indeed, when faced with American

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<sup>627</sup> Kim, “Security,” 57.

<sup>628</sup> Airgram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, December 10, 1972, FRUS 1969-72 19: 436-445. This view appears to have support. In an exchange with Habbib’s predecessor in August 1970, Park “went on rapidly, saying that time has come for Korea to develop her economy and her defense self-reliance, and he fully intended that his country would stand on her own feet but the only thing required is our understanding that this could not be done in day or two.” Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, August 4, 1970, FRUS 1969-72 19: 174-179.

<sup>629</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, November 22, 1974, Box 7, National Security Adviser, Memoranda of Conversation, GRFL.

pressure to halt the nuclear program, Park did not stoke domestic nationalist sentiment against the United States. Rather, he yielded to American pressure relatively quickly. Within six months of the original State Department telegram, South Korea renounced its nuclear program and ratified the NPT. He did emphasize, however, the need for the United States to provide South Korea with a strong security commitment. He declared that “if the US nuclear umbrella were to be removed, we have to start developing our nuclear capability to save ourselves.” Park later added that “there were and still are quite a number of Koreans doubting the commitment of the United States.”<sup>630</sup>

### *The Norms Thesis*

That South Korean leaders appealed to nationalist rhetoric suggests that they faced a permissive normative environment for developing nuclear weapons. The problem is that these nuclear activities were secret so as not to fall under domestic and international scrutiny when Park’s rule faced political rivals at home and a threatening security environment abroad. One cannot dismiss the importance of norms in the South Korean case but it is unclear what value-added the norms thesis brings to our understanding of the South Korean case. Alliance factors satisfactorily account for key aspects of the case.

### *The Prestige Thesis*

It remains puzzling as to what strategic benefit South Korean leaders were hoping to gain from nuclear weapons. It is uncertain under what conditions they would reveal the program. After all, much like the doomsday device in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*, the utility of the arsenal would have been at best limited if adversaries were ignorant of it. Perhaps they would have chosen what Vipin Narang describes as a ‘catalytic’ posture—one intended to provoke an American intervention on South Korea’s behalf in the event of a military crisis.<sup>631</sup> Moreover, with Seoul located so close to the DMZ, South Korea lacks strategic depth and therefore would have not absorbed a nuclear strike by North Korea’s patron, China. If North Korea were to have matched South Korean nuclear efforts, then the South Korean nuclear threat would lose credibility. Indeed, it remains unclear

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<sup>630</sup> Mitchell B. Reiss, *Without the Bomb: The Politics of Nuclear Nonproliferation* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988): 85-86 and 93-94.

<sup>631</sup> Narang, *Nuclear Strategy*, 15-17.

what exact strategic calculus motivated South Korean decision-making.<sup>632</sup> The desire to redress an unfavorable conventional military balance of power vis-à-vis the North might have been a sufficient strategic rationale in light of American abandonment. Yet it is worth pointing out that ‘fear of abandonment’ implies some degree of an emotional response. In this light, fearful decision-makers might undertake logical and reasonable actions, but not all actions would be thoroughly logical under such conditions of duress.

Nevertheless, the dubious military benefits of a nuclear weapons program for South Korea suggests that prestige motives could be at play. Unfortunately for the prestige thesis, it is unclear why Nixon’s stated withdrawal of troops from South Korea (and East Asia, more broadly) would trigger an interest in nuclear weapons founded not on military reasons but on prestige reasons. It is possible that Park saw nuclear weapons as some sort of military cure-all without a clear understanding of the doctrinal and operational implications associated with the possession of these weapons. Admittedly, this naiveté could have been the result of an overabundance of faith in nuclear weapons for resolving South Korea’s strategic problems. Though such a view is not exactly about prestige, it would mean that Park saw nuclear weapons as having some sort of political allure that he wished possess.

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<sup>632</sup> My interviews in South Korea with regional experts in March 2013 confirmed this observation.