

Chapter 6

Seoul in Isolation: Explaining South Korean Nuclear Behavior, 1968-1980

Though it relies extensively on atomic power as a civilian source of energy, South Korea's use of the atom has not always been peaceful. Scholars surmise that South Korean nuclear behavior began in 1970 when the government in Seoul initiated feasibility studies to explore nuclear weapons development. Two years later, South Korea began to devote resources to develop nuclear weapons. This program lasted only several years before its cancellation in 1975 and the accompanying decision to ratify the NPT. These actions, however, did not signify a complete end to South Korea's nuclear behavior. Suspicions of a nuclear program re-emerged in the late 1970s when a major domestic debate erupted briefly in South Korea over its foreign policy and the need for an independent nuclear capability.

The record of South Korean nuclear behavior, as summarized in Table 1, raises several questions. First, what prompted the South Korean government to consider the acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1970? Second, why did South Korea all of a sudden not only reverse course, but also become a full member of the NPT in 1975? Third, what explains the sporadic instances of South Korean nuclear behavior after 1975? Indeed, that South Korea both started and stopped a nuclear weapons program within a relatively short time frame constitutes an important empirical puzzle. As the case study will demonstrate below, many of the factors that previous scholars emphasize to explain the *beginning* of a nuclear weapons program remained present when the South Korean government *terminated* it. Existing theories of nuclear proliferation have difficulty in accounting for these patterns.

Alliance compensation theory explains South Korea's nuclear behavior better than the leading alternative explanations. Park Chung-hee, the South Korean President, first explored whether to acquire nuclear weapons in response to Nixon's sudden announcement to withdraw about a third of US forces from the Korean peninsula. This announcement came at a time when the United States was seeking to curtail its military commitments in East Asia due to mounting economic difficulties at home and its military failure in Vietnam. Park ultimately decided to ratchet up his country's nuclear program within a few

Year	Summary of South Korea's Nuclear Behavior
1970	Feasibility studies on desirability of nuclear weapons program.
1972	Initiation of nuclear weapons development.
1975	Cancellation of nuclear weapons program; ratification of NPT.
1977-79	Domestic debate over nuclear weapons development; possible centrifuge program.

Table 6.1: Timeline of South Korea's nuclear behavior.

years. Indeed, doubts over US alliance reliability remained 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 coerce the dismantlement of the program and force the South Korean government 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 security and economic needs. Still, South Korean leaders intimated that they would reconstitute their nuclear program when US President Jimmy Carter tried (unsuccessfully) to fully withdraw US troops from South Korea.

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 1 describes the strategic and domestic context facing South Korean decision-makers as well as competing predictions for South Korea's behavior. Section 2 reviews the history of the US-South Korean alliance prior to 1968. The purpose of this section is to highlight how concerns over alliance abandonment and entrapment were sometimes manifest. Section 3 tracks changes in US strategy in East Asia when President Richard Nixon came to office. It analyzes the conditions that led the South Korean government to explore the nuclear weapons option in the early 1970s. Section 4 determines the connection between shifts in US strategic posture that President Nixon initiated and South Korea's nuclear behavior. Section 5 describes the successful counter-proliferation strategy implemented by the Ford administration and then evaluates the ability of the competing theories to account for it. Section 6 investigates how President Jimmy Carter's policy towards South Korea might have sparked renewed interest in South Korea to develop nuclear weapons. Section 7 summarizes the empirical findings of the chapter and raises several key themes that emerge from the analysis.

6.1 Empirical Predictions

In this section I describe the strategic and domestic context that South Korean decision-makers faced in the 1960s and the 1970s. Accordingly, I specify the rival explanations that center on threat perceptions, domestic politics, and US force posture.

The Strategic Context

With an armistice ending the active stage of the Korean War signed in July 1953, the United States pledged its commitments to the South Korean government by signing a new alliance treaty and establishing a large troop presence in the country. Despite some concerns within the Eisenhower administration regarding the wisdom of the treaty, it satisfied South Korean President Syngman Rhee's demands for US defense commitments and placate his "genuine, however exaggerated, fear of abandonment by the US."¹ After all, Rhee let known to his US interlocutors that the withdrawal of US troops precipitated the invasion, reminding them of the dangers of uncertain commitments by referring to pre-war statements that declared South Korea as being outside the US defense perimeter in East Asia.²

The armistice still left South Korea in a precarious economic condition that over time would be addressed. Relative to the North, it was poor, agrarian, and lacking in industry. Recognizing this disparity, US policy-makers understood the importance of alleviating the impoverished status of South Korea. Consequently, the United States coupled military support with economic aid and programs.³ Nevertheless, the South Korean government did not rely exclusively on US aid. Shortly after taking power through a coup in 1961 Park used his military dictatorship to commit South Korea to a statist, export-oriented economic strategy that generated rapid economic and growth industrialization.⁴ As a result, South Korea's industrial capacity increased severalfold by the end of the 1960s.

Despite the alliance with the United States and the armistice, South Korea's geopolitical situation was still highly threatening. The Chinese occupation force remained on North Korean territory until 1958, during which time the North Korean leadership led reconstruction efforts to repair the devastation wrought by the war. North Korea maintained a threatening posture after the withdrawal of the Chinese military presence. Though Kim Il-song initially aligned himself with the Soviet Union, he ultimately chose to side with China during the Sino-Soviet split. This realignment was significant because China's behavior in East Asia was more incendiary than that of the Soviet Union. After all, China's leader Mao Tse-tung denounced Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis and advocated for a more confrontational and unyielding stance with the United States and other capitalist states. In fact, while endorsing aggressive communist action during the Cuban Missile Crisis, China engaged in a border war with India.⁵ It also sought a nuclear capability – a desire that was kindled following continuing

¹The US Department of Defense was particularly vocal in its opposition to a bilateral defense pact. Memorandum by the Assistant Secretaries of State for United Nations Affairs (Hickerson) and Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Secretary of State, June 8, 1953, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS) 1952-54, 7: 1155; Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Wilson), June 17, 1953, FRUS 1952-54, 7: 1190; Memorandum of Conversation, August 1, 1953, FRUS 1952-54, 8: 1462. The quote about Rhee is found in The President of the Republic of Korea (Rhee) to President Truman, March 21, 1952 FRUS 1952-54, 15: 114-116; Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Johnson) to the Secretary of State, April 8, 1953 FRUS 1952-54, 15: 896.

²See, e.g., Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the President, April 30, 1952, FRUS 1952-54 15: 185; Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for United Nations Affairs (Sandifer) to the Secretary of State, FRUS 1952-54, 7: 1191.

³The Department of the Army to the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (Hull), FRUS 1952-54, 9: 1877-1878.

⁴Amsden (1989).

⁵Prozumenschikov (1996/1997, 253).

confrontations with the United States over Taiwan and growing skepticism over Soviet support.⁶ As we learned in chapter five, China first detonated a nuclear weapon in October 1964.

Within several years of China's acquisition of nuclear weapons, North Korea resumed an aggressive foreign policy directed against US and South Korean interests. Hoping to undermine the South Korean-American alliance and incite an insurgency in the South, the North Korean government initiated irregular warfare in the area around the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in 1968. The pursuit of this strategy led to a series of skirmishes between the two states that would last three years. Several actions were especially provocative. First, the North Korean government attempted to assassinate Park in an incident called the Blue House Raid on January 17, 1968. Second, just a week after this assassination attempt, North Korean patrol boats captured the *USS Pueblo* and its US crew in international waters. Despite the close timing of these actions, members of the Johnson administration appeared to believe that North Korea did not want war, preferring instead to harass US forces and challenge the US military presence in East Asia.⁷ However, when North Korean fighter jets shot down an EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft, some members of the Nixon administration believed that retaliatory use of force was finally necessary.⁸ Though the United States decided against a military response, key US decision-makers took note of South Korea's heightened threat perceptions. Following the shooting down of the reconnaissance flight, Nixon noted 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."⁹

These North Korean provocations took place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Hoping to curb the spread of communism in the region, the United States devoted an increasing amount of manpower and resources to assist South Vietnam in defeating and rolling back North Vietnamese efforts at reunifying the country under communist control. South Korea provided significant military assistance to the United States in the Vietnam War. At the height of its involvement in the conflict, South Korea had as many as fifty thousand troops in Vietnam. Several reasons explain the magnitude of South Korea's military contributions. First, unlike his predecessor, President Johnson wanted South Korea to provide support to the conflict by playing a military role in Vietnam, thereby sharing the burden of fighting the war.¹⁰ Second, in exchange for these contributions, South Korea benefited from considerable increases in US economic and military assistance.¹¹ Economist Keuhno Park argues that Vietnam-related procurements spurred greater economic growth in South Korea.¹² South Korea also extracted greater assurances of US security commitments.¹³ Third, Park shared the concerns of US policy-makers that the fate of East Asian states in the struggle against transnational communism were linked. US success in Vietnam would,

⁶Goldstein (2000).

⁷Memorandum 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.

⁸Memorandum 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.

⁹Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, April 16, 1969, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 31.

¹⁰Hong (2011, 484).

¹¹Kim (1970, 519).

¹²Park (2003, 376).

¹³Memorandum of Conversation, May 18, 1965, FRUS 1964-1968, 29: 106-109.

after all, strengthen the anti-communist coalition in the region. That Park had material incentives for articulating these values should not obscure the plausibility of these beliefs when one takes into account South Korea's threat environment.

Still, a major reason for why the Johnson administration offered a very limited response to North Korean provocations is because it wanted to avoid the development of a second military front in East Asia.¹⁴ Johnson's inaction created new tensions in the alliance with South Korea. These tensions became apparent during a meeting between former deputy secretary of defense Cyrus Vance and President Park. 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 even laid partial blame on the United States for the Blue House Raid itself. After all, North Korean forces had to sneak behind the US forces that were positioned along the DMZ. Despite articulating these criticisms, Vance and Park reiterated their countries' Vietnam War and alliance commitments, respectively.¹⁵

Because the North was still the most powerful of the two Koreas, the US military presence was significant for improving the local conventional balance of power in the South's favor. Reducing that military presence would have meant a weakening of South Korea's position vis-à-vis the North. In addition to the US conventional military presence on the Korean peninsula, US tactical nuclear weapons were stationed so as to bolster nuclear extended deterrence.¹⁶ Nevertheless, my main independent variable is a shift in the strategic posture undertaken by the United States that removes (or threatens to remove) conventional military resources away from the Korean peninsula. For a shift in the US strategic posture to generate fears of abandonment and thereby encourage nuclear behavior, it should be either unanticipated or unilateral (that is, without the consent of the ally).

The Domestic Context

Domestic politics explanations offer the most compelling set of alternative hypotheses. These explanations attach importance to either the role of economic preferences or the political institutions or norms that prevail in domestic society. Some variation exists in the domestic institutions and economic strategies found in South Korea. For much of the Cold War, South Korea was authoritarian. The form of authoritarianism changed with the country's leadership, beginning with Rhee's brutal authoritarianism to Parks

¹⁴Lee (2006, 58).

¹⁵Memorandum from Cyrus R. Vance to President Johnson, February 20, 1968, *FRUS* 1964-68, 29: 384-391.

¹⁶These missiles remained on the peninsula until their withdrawal by US President George H.W. Bush with the approval of the South Korean government.

repressive rule and ending with Chun Doo-hwan’s military dictatorship. In the late-1980s South Korea undertook democratic reforms and has remained a democratic state ever since.

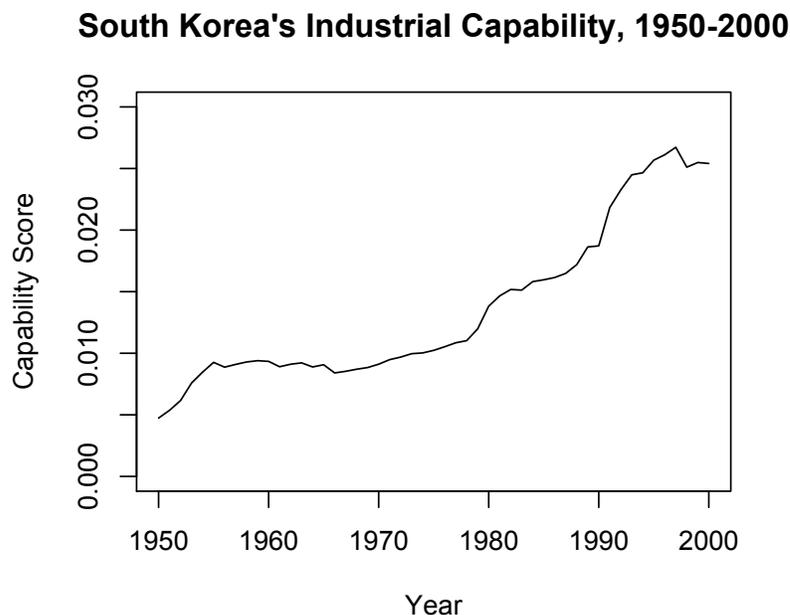


Figure 6.1: SOUTH KOREA’S INDUSTRIAL CAPABILITY. SOURCE: SINGER (1987).

Despite these changes in its political system, the South Korean state adopted an economic strategy that emphasized the regulatory powers and macroeconomic management of the state. This so-called ‘developmental’ state assumes an active role in promoting economic growth by 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 archetypal of the developmental state, other observers have extended the label to South Korea.¹⁷ As indicated earlier, 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, already industrialized states.¹⁸ Figure 1 highlights the growth evinced by the South Korean economy between 1950 and 2000. To measure economic capacity, I draw data from Jo and Gartzke’s foundational quantitative study on the determinants of nuclear proliferation. They use the average of energy consumption and iron or steel production in a given year to calculate values for this index variable.¹⁹ In light of these trends, South Korea should not engage in nuclear behavior at all so as not to compromise such economic strategies. Still, it is possible that these political economic variables influenced South Korea’s termination of nuclear behavior.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the discussion regarding the strategic context confronting South

¹⁷Evans (1995); Johnson (1982).

¹⁸Vogel (1991).

¹⁹Jo and Gartzke (2007).

Korean decision-makers towards the late 1960s. First, the threat environment in which South Korea found itself was highly threatening. North Korea, under the patronage of a now nuclear-armed China, initiated an aggressive foreign policy against South Korea. The intensity of these threats created further incentive for South Korean leaders to uncover ways to neutralize North Korean coercive diplomacy and deter military aggression. Second, the conventional military superiority of the North meant that the South relied on the United States for its protection. Yet the strength of the US conventional military presence on the peninsula would weaken. During the 1970s, two adverse shifts took place in the US strategic posture that directly affected South Korea. Only one of these announcements – the one made by Nixon in 1970 – materialized in a partial troop withdrawal. This reduction of one troop division took place after the articulation of the Guam Doctrine. This foreign policy statement declared that US allies in East Asia should bear a larger share of conventional defense in the region. 1968 marked the highest level of US troops in South Korea ever since 1960. After that year, a notable drop occurred at about 1970 before stabilizing at just over 40,000 troops. This number appears to stabilize until a minor dip at the end of the Cold War.²⁰

Summary

To test the competing claims summarized in Table 2, I use process-tracing evidence to explain the pattern of South Korean nuclear behavior for the years between 1968 and 1980.

6.2 Explaining the Onset of South Korean Nuclear Behavior

In this section, I show that South Korea began its nuclear behavior out of fear of US abandonment. These anxieties regarding US alliance reliability became salient when Nixon announced the withdrawal of one troop division, thereby reducing the size of the US conventional military presence on the Korean peninsula by a third. Ideally, documents would expressly show how South Korean decision-makers tied decisions to engage in nuclear behavior with their apprehensions regarding US security commitments. Such ‘smoking gun’ evidence is absent, however.²¹ Instead, we have to consider the sum total of circum-

²⁰Some readers might allege that it should not matter whether the major power patron stations 80,000 or 100,000 military personnel on its ally’s territory. In other words, the difference between these two quantities should not have important consequences for the robustness of the ‘trip wire’ that the troop presence embodies. After all, the costs of aggression are still high for the adversary because it would involve the participation of the major power patron regardless of the actual size of its troop deployments. Though this critique is important, it neglects the psychological effects associated with partial troop withdrawals. My theory emphasizes that even partial troop withdrawals can generate concerns over the medium- to long-term intentions of the major power to credibly offer extended deterrence. That is, partial troop withdrawals might lead allies to anticipate even more troop withdrawals, thus prompting greater unease about the durability of the security commitments they receive from their patrons. These beliefs are reasonable if the patron is undertaking additional troop redeployments in the ally’s own region.

²¹Historian Seung-Young Kim cites a quotation of Park’s own daughter that draws this connection explicitly, stating that her father’s decision to acquire nuclear weapons was “to safeguard national security when American commitment became uncertain while China and the Soviet Union continued to provide the alliance support to North Korea.” Park Geun-hye quoted in Kim (2001, 57). This explanation, gleaned from a 2001 interview with the historian, might seem like a *post hoc* rationalization of events, but is nevertheless consistent with statements made in the mid-1970s by South Korean leaders

Explanation	Theoretical Mechanism	Observable Implications	Case Predictions
<i>Alliance Compens- ation Onset</i>	Evaluation of credibility of major power security commitments with reference to conventional military deployments	Adverse troop redeployments suggest abandonment and provoke affected allies into engaging in nuclear behavior	Nixon's 1970 troop withdrawals in light of changes in US posture in East Asia should lead South Korea to adopt nuclear behavior; Carter's plan for total troop withdrawal should restart South Korean nuclear behavior in late 1970s
<i>Alliance Compens- ation Termination</i>	Major power pressure and bargaining	Interaction of economic and security dependence shape counterproliferation effectiveness and ally responsiveness to major power pressure	South Korean bilateral security pact and economic dependence on the United States should imply quick counterproliferation effort in both instances
<i>Balance-of-Threat Theory</i>	Threat perceptions	Presence of direct military threat provides incentives for nuclear behavior	Probability of nuclear behavior should increase over time as function of North Korean depredations and Chinese atomic detonation during mid-1960s; deproliferation occurs when these threats fade
<i>Domestic Politics Explanation</i>	Preferences over political economy and foreign policy; coalition politics	Level of internationalization of economic strategy shapes incentives for nuclear behavior; Economically conservatives engage in nuclear behavior so long as they stay in power; nuclear reversal follows change in ruling coalition	Park Chung-hee should not initiate nuclear behavior due to export-oriented growth strategy; conditional on initiating, Park should not cancel the program so not to appear weak under foreign pressure

Table 6.2: Summary of theoretical explanations, observable implications, and predictions for South Korea's nuclear behavior.

stantial evidence that reveals South Korean apprehensions regarding the credibility of US nuclear security guarantees.

Government Reorganization, Then Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons

South Korea's nuclear behavior began with the creation of new governmental agencies. In August 1970, the South Korean government founded two new defense agencies, the Agency for Defense Development (ADD) and the Weapons Exploitation Committee (WEC), to explore the development of an indigenous nuclear weapons program. Shortly thereafter, under the aegis of Park, the WEC reached a unanimous decision to pursue nuclear weapons development.

To be sure, by this time, South Korea had already a very nascent civilian nuclear program. Throughout the 1960s South Korea's access to nuclear materials was severely limited. As a beneficiary of the 'Atoms for Peace' initiative spearheaded by President Dwight Eisenhower, the South Korean government 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. Instead, the South Korean government 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.²² To make further progress in nuclear research, the South Korean government decided in the late 1960s 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 1976.²³ Yet the purpose of such initiatives was arguably to address South Korea's increasing energy needs to support its rapid industrial growth. The activities of the newly created WEC, however, suggest a dramatic change in South Korea's intended use of atomic energy.

Within two years South Korean government started mobilizing military, academic, and industrial resources towards the production of a nuclear weapon.²⁴ However, the program soon encountered several technical challenges. One problem facing the program 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 up until this date, the United States was a major source of nuclear technology and fuel. Because of expected US opposition to this new initiative, the South Korean government 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 United Kingdom in building a reprocessing facility. In addition, the South Korean government sent representatives to other nuclear capable western countries

regarding the strength of US security guarantees.

²²Jasanoff and Kim (2009, 132).

²³Kang and Feiveson (2001, 54). Wonjaryokchong, *Hanguk Wonjaryok Samsipnyonsa*[Thirty Year History of Korean Nuclear Energy] (Daeduk:Wonjaryok-yonguso, 1990), 55-142 and 170. This Korean language secondary source argues that South Korea planned to acquire a reprocessing capability. Kim (2001, 54) cites this source to allege that the purpose was to acquire a reprocessing capability because of a lack of supply on the international market. The original source, however, does not make such an observation.

²⁴Kim (2001, 58).

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 Belgium company Belgonucléaire. South Korean scientists were also able to secure the import of the NRX experiment reactor from Canada and France. Having this type of reactor enabled South Korea to produce weapon-grade plutonium.²⁵

To be sure, South Korean nuclear behavior is puzzling for its seeming lack of sophistication.. First, despite the reduction in US manpower on the peninsula, US tactical nuclear weapons (i.e. the nuclear sword) remained. Second, it is not clear what South Korea intended to do with its nuclear weapons. Nor was its leadership clear on the conditions under which it would reveal the program. After all, much like the doomsday device in film-maker Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, the utility of the arsenal would have been at best limited if adversaries were ignorant of it. Third, 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 is not entirely what strategic calculus motivated South Korean decision-making.²⁶ 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 US 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.

South Korean Anxieties as Motivation

Much of South Korea's behavior had to do with concerns relating to the changes that US political leaders making to their country's global strategic posture at the end of the 1960s. 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 US public became increasingly critical of the US 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 US withdrawal from Vietnam could only be achieved if there were a workable arrangement that guaranteed South Vietnam's security.²⁷ Amidst faltering negotiations with the North Vietnamese and domestic demands for pulling out of Vietnam, Nixon initiated a strategy of phased troop withdrawals and increased reliance on Vietnamese troops.²⁸

This policy, known either as 'Vietnamization' or the Guam Doctrine, was the cornerstone of a general

²⁵Kim (2001, 59).

²⁶My interviews in South Korea with regional experts in March 2013 confirmed this observation.

²⁷Memorandum 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.

²⁸National 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.

theme of Nixon's first term of office. In a speech delivered at Guam on July 25, 1969, Nixon announced that although the United States will maintain its treaty commitments and continue to provide nuclear umbrellas, the United States would ask its allies to contribute more to satisfy their own security needs. Specifically, Nixon stated, "we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense."²⁹ Transferring military responsibilities to South Vietnamese forces was one aspect of this policy, but the Nixon administration also sought to implement similar changes of policy in East Asia.

To clarify these policy changes Nixon communicated with key decision-makers in the region.³⁰ On August 21, 1969, Nixon met with President Park in San Francisco to discuss the US-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." He noted, however, that South Korean "efforts toward military and economic self-reliance are the correct road to take." Park reminded Nixon that the US 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 US military commitments was a "general statement."³¹ 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 time after the shooting down of the EC-121.³² A National Security Decision Memorandum in March 1970 noted the need to remove one of the two infantry divisions from the Korean peninsula by the middle of 1971.³³

²⁹ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon: 1969* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971): 544-548.

³⁰ For an extensive discussion on the Guam Doctrine and its impact on South Korea, see Nam (1986). I agree with Nam's assessment of the underlying conditions that led to both the Guam Doctrine and changes in South Korean behavior.

³¹ 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 US forces. Memorandum of Conversation, December 2, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 213-216.

³² Memorandum From President Nixon to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), November 24, 1969, FRUS 1969-72 19: 117. It is important not to overstate Nixon's role in effecting troop withdrawals from South Korea. Johnson had already commissioned an internal report to re-evaluate the US relationship with South Korea. One suggestion mooted by the report emphasized the need to reduce the US 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 1962 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) notes the harmful effects of any US troop reductions in South Korea. These effects included "considerable apprehension that the military reductions were a prelude to the withdrawal of US protection" if improperly handled. Special NIE 42-62, 'The Outlook for South Korea,' April 4, 1962, p. 8. Folder: "South Korea (42)," Box 6, National Intelligence Estimates, National Security File, LBJL. The 1965 NIE similarly observes 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.

³³ 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).

I code this declared change in the US strategic posture as unfavorable to South Korean leaders. After all, South Korea still faced a dangerous strategic situation that fears of US abandonment would amplify. To review, North Korea intensified its provocations in the late 1960s. 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. Although South Korea was just beginning to benefit from rapid industrialization, it faced a severely unfavorable conventional military balance of power with *either* communist adversary. The combination of the Guam Doctrine and Nixon's announced troop withdrawal stoked fears of abandonment in the face of these threats, thereby encouraging the South Korean leadership to undertake nuclear behavior.

Additional evidence shows that the South Korean leadership did exhibit concerns over the implications of US partial withdrawal.³⁴ Ahead of implementing this policy the Nixon administration made a number of consultations with the South Korean government. When Wheeler mooted 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 further added that South Korea would have to provide its own deterrent and defense capability.³⁵ Interestingly, an examination of the discussions between representatives of the two governments reveal that South Korean leaders did not expect any troop withdrawals from South Korea.³⁶

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."³⁷

The confused nature of these exchanges helps explain 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

³⁴Cha (1999, 64-67) also uncovers evidence that the South Korean leadership feared US abandonment in light of these changes in the US strategic posture in East Asia.

³⁵Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, November 25, 1969, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 117-118.

³⁶In his description of the dialogue held between Nixon and Park in August 1969, Chae-jin Lee agrees with this view. According to Lee (2006, 68), "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 Vietnam and that if he eventually decided to do so, it would only take place after full consultation with South Korea in advance." To provide evidentiary support for this claim, he cites the recollections of the South Korean ambassador to the United States during the summit meeting.

³⁷See Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, January 29, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 121-122.

61,000 to 40,000. Park protested and claimed that this announcement came as a “profound shock.”³⁸ To assuage concerns over US 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. Park, however, suggested to the US ambassador to South Korea 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 program would weaken his domestic position. He then asked for the United States to delay its decision for another five years.³⁹

Park continued this line of argument in the months ahead 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.”⁴⁰ 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. The US Ambassador to South Korea William 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.”⁴¹ Even worse, some efforts to allay South Korean concerns backfired. In a press conference held in Seoul in August 1970, Vice President Spiro Agnew deepened the uncertainty when he declared the US intention to withdrawal *all* American troops from the peninsula within five years.⁴² 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.”⁴³

I should note that the US partial withdrawal was not the sole source of South Korean apprehensions regarding US security guarantees. First, the United States was scaling down its military presence all across

³⁸Secretary 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.

³⁹Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, May 29, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 154-155. Next month, in a 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 US 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 of the fact that South Korea dispatched more than two infantry divisions to Vietnam. To make things worse, it was at this time, in July 1970, the United States notified to pull out one of two remaining infantry divisions from South Korea, known as the “Guam Doctrine” ... and he (President Park) strongly protested against it.” This secondary source corroborates my analysis. 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.

⁴⁰Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, June 1, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 158.

⁴¹Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, August 4, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 174-179.

⁴²Kim (2001, 55).

⁴³Memorandum of Conversation, December 2, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 216. This uneasiness reflects 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.” Translation thanks to research assistance. Park Chung-hee, *Kukga-wa Hyokmyung-gwa Na* [State, Revolution and Me] (Seoul: Chiguchon, 1997, originally published by Hyangmunsa, 1963), 227-31.

East Asia in light of its military failure in Indochina. Second, US efforts at pursuing *rapprochement* with China created further unease over US actions 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 further tilt the balance of power 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.⁴⁴ Shortly after becoming President, Nixon used secure diplomatic channels to advance this initiative.⁴⁵ Though a pragmatic change in policy for the United States, South Korean leaders felt threatened by the prospect of US *rapprochement* with China. Specifically, they were worried that the United States would grant the Chinese greater leeway in East Asia and accept its request for US withdrawal from Korea.⁴⁶ Indeed, the US partial withdrawal likely magnified South Korean unease over US efforts *rapprochement* with China.⁴⁷

In case some readers remain unsatisfied of the connection between US partial withdrawals and South Korean nuclear behavior, other aspects of South Korean foreign policy at this time are worth considering. An observable implication of alliance compensation theory is that the ally should respond to unfavorable shifts of their patron's strategic posture with actions that suggest fears of abandonment. These actions could even entail policies intended to make the patron 'pay' for its strategic shifts through retaliation or presenting new hurdles for the patron to meet its security objectives. I argue that the South Korean government did embrace new policies or positions consistent with fears of abandonment.

To begin, the documentary record is replete with examples of the South Korean leadership 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, it desired greater US support for the modernization of the South Korean military and stronger assurances regarding US commitments to its security. Oftentimes these goals were explicitly linked: Park wanted the US deployments to remain unchanged until the South Korean military was sufficiently modernized.⁴⁸ Yet these demands elicited a mixed response from the United States. In addition

⁴⁴Nixon (1967).

⁴⁵Memorandum From President Nixon to his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), February 1, 1969, FRUS 1969-72, 27: 7.

⁴⁶Kim (2001, 55). To be sure, The South Korean Foreign Ministry made official statements regarding how US accommodation of China might encourage the Chinese to favorably restrain North Korea's foreign policy. See Lee (2006, 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.

⁴⁷A Korean language secondary source makes the following observation: "[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, *Huimang-gwa Tojon-Kim Yongsik Oegyoheogorok [Hope and Challenge – Memoir of Kim Yong-sik Diplomacy]* (Seoul: Dong-A Ilbo sa, 1987), 246. Translation thanks to research assistance.

⁴⁸Telegram 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:

to the finality of the troop withdrawal plans, US 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 US security commitments, Nixon wrote of the significant domestic pressure he faced to increase burden-sharing with 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."⁴⁹ In effect, Nixon was promising more of something he already had trouble obtaining. Thus, it is not surprising that Park later asked Ambassador to South Korea William J. Porter for greater clarification regarding the "nature and extent of modernization" of South Korean military forces.⁵⁰ Park even threatened non-cooperation in reduction talks should negotiations over South Korean military modernization prove to be unsatisfactory.⁵¹ 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.

The South Korean government's anxious desire for stronger assurances persisted throughout the year. Yet its diplomacy softened shortly after the establishment of ADD and WEC in August 1970.⁵² 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."⁵³ 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."⁵⁴ The explanations put forward by members of the Department of State seem plausible, but it is also likely that Park recognized US resolve to proceed with these troop withdrawals. Exploring the nuclear weapons option might have been a first step for Park towards acquiring insurance against foreign threats.

This new understanding that the South Korean and US governments reached, however, did not ease their relations. As the date for implementing the troop withdrawals approached in early 1971, US government officials complained of the South Korean government's "delaying tactics" in deploying replacement

170-173.

⁴⁹Letter from President Nixon to Korean President Park, May 26, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 152-154.

⁵⁰Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, May 29, 1970, FRUS 1969-1972, 19: 154-155.

⁵¹Park 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.

⁵²At the very least, 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.

⁵³Porter advanced the hypothesis 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.

⁵⁴Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon, November 10, 1970, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 197-198.

troops along the DMZ.⁵⁵ Ironically, the South Korean government began to implement its own troop withdrawals from South Vietnam.⁵⁶ This action frustrated US officials for some of the same reasons expressed by the South Korean government in 1970. Ambassador Phillip C. Habib stated 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.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, the South Korean government resumed its efforts to extract even more assurances from the United States.⁵⁸ Despite Park's alleged acquiescence in the fall of 1970, his government remained a troublesome ally.

6.3 Reversing South Korea's Nuclear Behavior

South Korea's covert nuclear weapons program only lasted a few years. By 1975 the South Korean government dismantled the program and even ratified the NPT. What explains this rapid reversal?

Changes in South Korea's threat environment cannot account for South Korea's deproliferation. In fact, the threat environment facing South Korea does not appear to have waned in intensity. Direct evidence of how South Korean leaders understood the regional security environment is difficult to ascertain so as to fully evaluate this theory. 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. The subsequent US 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.”⁵⁹

Second, South Korea's diplomatic relations with Japanese were seriously strained after a North Korean

⁵⁵Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, February 2, 1971, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 224.

⁵⁶South Korean decision-makers previously believed that their participation in the Vietnam War would ensure a sustained US military presence on the Korean peninsula. As one Korean language source argues, “the government (of South Korea) was aware of the effects of Guam 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: Joongang Ilbosa, 1995), p. 316.

⁵⁷Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, November 3, 1971, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 290-293. Ultimately, the South Korean government agreed to postpone its withdrawals. Memorandum From John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), February 5, 1972, FRUS 1969-72, 19: 315-316.

⁵⁸Memorandum 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.

⁵⁹Kim (2001, 64).

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 conflictual regional environment.⁶⁰ Put together, tensions in the region remained sufficiently high to warrant the continuation of a nuclear weapons program, thus discounting the empirical validity of this hypothesis.

If the threat environment did not lower the incentives for the South Korean to develop nuclear weapons, then what did? In this section I explore the extent to which alliance politics led to the termination of South Korea's nuclear behavior. Alliance compensation theory predicts that South Korea's bilateral security and economic relationship facilitated the use of an effective counterproliferation strategy. In other words, because the alliance was bilateral and South Korea was economically and technologically very dependent on its patron, the United States could mount a rapid counterproliferation effort to reverse South Korea's nuclear behavior. Upon determining the empirical validity of this argument, I then assess the relative impact of other possible factors that alternative explanations for nuclear reversal would identify as important.

The US Reaction to the South Korean Program

It is unclear as to what extent the Nixon administration knew of the earlier phases of South Korea's nuclear behavior. Many of the archival materials that pertain to both South Korea and nuclear weapons remain closed.⁶¹ No documents contained in the FRUS series from the years between 1969 and 1972 suggest US knowledge of South Korea's exploration and pursuit of nuclear weapons in the early 1970s.⁶² One possibility that cannot be dismissed is that Nixon tacitly approved of South Korea's nuclear weapons program. He might have understood that nuclear weapons offered South Korea its own deterrent capability such that the United States could justifiably lessen its conventional military presence on the peninsula. Moreover, Nixon and Kissinger did feel that counter-proliferation efforts directed at allies sometimes risked being counterproductive.⁶³ Thus, the Nixon administration and the South Korean government may have maintained a code of silence regarding South Korean efforts at developing nuclear weapons.

Despite uncertainty over this issue, it is clear that United States became cognizant of the program

⁶⁰Oberdorfer (2001, 52-54). As Lind (2009, 538-540) reports, the South Korean government still felt threatened by their erstwhile imperial rulers. This threat perception was based not only on an assessment of Japanese capabilities, but also on the Japanese government's reluctance to satisfactorily atone for its historical crimes and abuses against Korean society. For more on the Cold War relationship between South Korea and Japan, see Cha (1999).

⁶¹Personal correspondence with an archivist at the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library, September 2, 2011.

⁶²FRUS has not yet released Part 2 of the Korea series for the years 1973-1976.

⁶³Gavin (2008, 28). That Nixon tacitly agreed to a South Korean nuclear program seems very unlikely. It would require a character reversal insofar as a nuclear-armed South Korea would be more difficult for the Nixon administration to control.

by the end of 1974. The US government was already aware in November 1974 that South Korea was acquiring a type of Canadian nuclear reactor that “was most vulnerable to clandestine diversion.” Yet a NSC memorandum expressed satisfaction over the safeguards implemented on American and Canadian supplied nuclear facilities to South Korea.⁶⁴ Indeed, an internal Department of State memorandum circulated in October 1974 on South Korea made no mention of a nuclear weapons program.⁶⁵ However, a telegram sent two months later from the US embassy in Seoul alerted the Secretary of State of South Korea’s nuclear activities.⁶⁶ According to this document, “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 was in basic agreement with the embassy’s assessment and shared the view that South Korea’s nuclear behavior would have a “major destabilizing effect on the region.”⁶⁷

With knowledge of South Korea’s nuclear behavior, the Ford administration directed a counterproliferation effort against its East Asian ally.⁶⁸ The US strategy towards South Korea focused on achieving four basic 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.”⁶⁹ 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 South Korea’s nuclear behavior in the first place. The United States had to allay skepticism over the reliability of its security commitments.⁷⁰

⁶⁴The same memorandum did warn of a loophole in American agreements with Korea on civilian nuclear assistance. The recency of the Indian ‘peaceful nuclear explosion’ (PNE) drew concerns that the South Korean government would divert plutonium “specifically for PNE use.” National Security Council Memorandum for General Scowcroft, “Sale of Canadian Nuclear Reactor to South Korea,” November 18, 1974, Box 5, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL. These documents reveal that Drezner (1999) is incorrect in supposing that the Indian PNE motivated the US to begin counter-proliferation efforts against South Korea. Drezner’s mistake, however, is a function of having to rely on newspaper sources due to the lack of documentary materials available to him at the time.

⁶⁵Memorandum 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

⁶⁶Department of State Telegram, “ROK Plans to Develop Nuclear Weapons and Missiles,” December 1974, folder: “Korea (1),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

⁶⁷Memorandum for Secretary Kissinger, February 28, 1975, folder: “Korea (4),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

⁶⁸Memoirs 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 (e.g., Mieczkowski 2005). Ford (1979, 212-213) only indicates 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. Kissinger says nothing about the South Korean nuclear weapons program in *White House Years*, *Years of Upheaval*, and *Years of Renewal*. This silence is likely due to the timing of the publication of these memoirs.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰See also Telegram 2685 From the Embassy in the Republic of Korea to the Department of State, April 18, 1975, FRUS 1973-76 E-12.

Implementing the Counterproliferation Strategy

The Ford administration succeeded in fulfilling the four objectives outlined earlier and getting South Korea to renounce nuclear weapons. To obtain the first objective, the Ford administration threatened to cut off financing for the *Kori 2* nuclear power plant and other planned nuclear facilities through the Export-Import Bank, the US export credit agency. Sneider reported that he had asked a South Korean official as to “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.”⁷¹ Furthermore, the US government applied pressure on 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 PNE and had already faced severe criticism for supplying a repressive state with nuclear technology. After some wrangling, France also agreed to withdraw its assistance to South Korea’s efforts in obtaining a reprocessing capability. Belgonucléaire terminated its contract with the South Korean government in November 1977.⁷²

As for the second objective, the US government pressured South Korea to take part 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 this issue of making a credible commitment to eschew nuclear weapons acquisition.⁷³ South Korea was in fact an original signatory to the NPT, but its ratification in the Korean legislature did not yet take place. This lack of commitment added uncertainty over South Korea’s intentions and was a source of discussion in US exchanges with South Korean government officials. By April 1975, however, South Korea ratified the NPT and agreed to inspections and monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency. To get South Korea to finally ratify the treaty, the US government used a variety of levers. Congress suspended a \$79 million dollar loan and \$157 million loan guarantee to intended to finance a civilian nuclear power plant.⁷⁴

Finally, with respect to the fourth objective, members of the Ford administration displayed greater sensitivity over South Korean perceptions of US security guarantees. The Department of State recognized that South Korea’s “nuclear weapon effort has been in part reflection of lessened [South Korean government’s] confidence in US security commitments.”⁷⁵ The Department of Defense agreed with this assessment, stating that “President Park’s fears of isolation and the possible withdrawal of US forces have led him to embark on a secret program to develop nuclear weapons.”⁷⁶ Indeed, the US embassy in Seoul noted the importance of South Korean perceptions of US security commitments ahead of a visit by Vice

⁷¹Quoted in Oberdorfer (2001, 72).

⁷²Kim (2001, 66).

⁷³Memorandum for Secretary Kissinger, February 28, 1975, folder: “Korea (4),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

⁷⁴Drezner (1999, 258).

⁷⁵Draft 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.

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

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 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.”⁷⁷

NSC member William R. Smyser even circulated an old internal memorandum to Kissinger that outlined the decision-making behind the 1949 US 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.”⁷⁸

This sensitivity over troop withdrawals now informed US policy-making towards the region. Indeed, it shaped how the Ford administration confronted certain policy recommendations during this phase of negotiations with the South Korean government. For example, the Department of Defense considered additional restructuring of troop deployments on the Korean 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.”⁷⁹ Ford apparently agreed. In a note addressed to the Secretary of Defense, Kissinger stated that proposed changes to US force deployments and structure in South Korea were presently “inadvisable.”⁸⁰

The US counterproliferation effort succeeded in curtailing South Korea’s nuclear behavior. One 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.⁸¹ However, it was arguably less the application of economic statecraft that mattered as it was the specific

⁷⁷Department 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.

⁷⁸Memorandum for Secretary Kissinger, March 5, 1975, folder: “Korea (5),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

⁷⁹Memorandum for President Ford, April, 1975?, folder: “Korea (6),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

⁸⁰Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, undated, folder: “Korea (6),” Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL. It is worth noting here that some officials suggested new troop withdrawals in the Nixon administration after 1971. Kissinger vetoed these suggestions. Airgram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, December 10, 1972, FRUS 1969-72 19: 436-445; Memorandum From Richard Kennedy of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), January 16, 1973, FRUS 1973-76 E-12. That US decision-makers themselves saw the linkage between troop redeployments and South Korea’s nuclear behavior also builds confidence for alliance compensation theory. They may be relying on private insights drawn from information that remains unavailable in the documentary record. Still, decision-makers’ recognition of these linkages does not provide decisive proof for my theory because of the uncertainty over which pieces of evidence they are using.

⁸¹Solingen (2007, 90-91).

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 US counterproliferation efforts. Due to the quick pace of its industrialization, existing energy sources available to South Korea were increasingly unable to meet demand (see figure 2). 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.⁸² 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.⁸³ This dependency meant that South Korea was extraordinarily sensitive to the possibility that its access to peaceful US nuclear technology during the 1970s. Simply put, South Korea was vulnerable to US pressure.

South Korean Energy Imports, 1960-1975

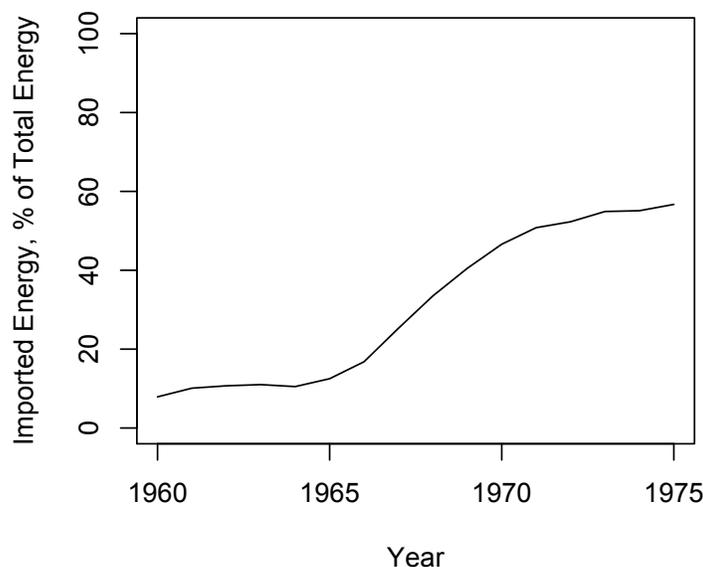


Figure 6.2: SOUTH KOREA’S ENERGY DEPENDENCY. SOURCE: HA (1983, 100).

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 US pressure to ratify the NPT, its leadership made plain that its future nuclear behavior would be a function of the strength of US security commitments. Such statements imply that South Korea was willing to compromise on its economic objectives if its security needs would not be met satisfactorily. Thus, as already discussed, the Ford administration

⁸²Ha (1983, 234).

⁸³Drezner (1999, 260-261).

refrained from opening any discussions of further troop withdrawals. Key officials verbally communicated their commitment to South Korean security as well as offer sophisticated military hardware to strengthen the South Korean military.⁸⁴

To be sure, US decision-makers expressed such reassurances at a time when US reputation in the region was at its nadir. On April 12, 1975, the US airlifted US nationals and members of the US-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 the Cambodian 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 US civilian and military personnel from the city, but also enabled the Provisional Revolutionary Government to gain nominal authority in South Vietnam. US losses in the region did not stop there: communist forces also began acquiring significant control in Laos, another country whose government was supported by the United States. With these losses occurring in rapid succession, US decision-makers, such as Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Schlesinger, recognized that the international stature and reputation for resolve of the United States had now diminished.⁸⁵

Finally, several US decision-makers did in fact threaten complete abandonment should South Korea proceed with a nuclear weapons program. In March 1975, Kissinger threatened to terminate all US security guarantees to the East Asian ally unless it credible commitments not to proliferate. Such threats did not disappear even after South Korea's acquiescence to US demands. Over a year later Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told the South Korean Minister of Defense that there might be a "review of the entire spectrum of its relations with the ROK."⁸⁶ These statements might pose a problem for my theory of intra-alliance nuclear behavior. If concerns about abandonment prompted South Korea to engage in nuclear behavior in the first place, then explicit US threats to completely abandon the alliance should have added to South Korea's inclination to develop nuclear weapons. Still, the execution of these threats was contingent on South Korea's behavior. *Ceteris paribus*, states would prefer to maintain major power patronage than lose it, especially if that patronage still entails troop support. If South Korea were to have been hedging its bets with the nuclear program, these threats in fact resolved uncertainty over the US security commitments by stating unambiguously the terms by which they would be lost.

That the United States both provided reassurances and threatened alliance abrogation could not have been possible if the alliance were multilateral. In a multilateral setting, the threat of alliance termination would have created wider discord with other allies by giving them additional reason to fear abandonment. The prospective loss of an ally would weaken the integrity of the alliance as well as reduce the aggregation of military capability. Exacerbating the situation was that South Korea also faced a dearth of outside

⁸⁴Memorandum 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)," Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, GRFL.

⁸⁵Indeed, such concerns likely motivated the forceful 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.

⁸⁶Oberdorfer (2001, 72-73).

options with which to replace the United States. Japan was one likely source of alternative alliance support, yet Japan's limited defense policy and legacy of a former colonizer precluded this option. South Korea's reliance on the United States for its own security was extensive.

6.4 Jimmy Carter and a New Shift in US Strategic Posture, 1976-1979

Emerging developments in US politics threatened the Ford administration's successful resolution of South Korea's nuclear behavior. 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 US support for a repressive regime like Park's South Korea distasteful.⁸⁷ At one point during the Democratic primary campaign, Carter even promised the complete withdrawal of all US military forces from the Korean peninsula. Such early campaign rhetoric turned out to reflect Carter's true intentions for South Korea.⁸⁸ 39,000 US 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. As evidence of its commitment to this initiative, the White House did not even wish for an analysis of its probable consequences.⁸⁹

This planned troop redeployment quickly ran into opposition from both administration and international sources. Carter's position provoked a backlash amongst 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 US 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 expressed support for recommending a softer policy position. These efforts came to naught as Carter elected to ignore 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 Korea by the end of 1978.⁹⁰

International opposition towards the planned troop withdrawal grew during the summer of 1977. The

⁸⁷Carter was certainly not alone in these sentiments. Strom Thurmond led a petition of about one-hundred Congressmen that renounced human rights violations in South Korea during the Ford presidency. Indeed, Koreagate – a Congressional effort at critically probing the US-South Korean alliance – added further strain to the relationship between the two countries. For a summary of these Congressional debates, see Sungjoo (1980).

⁸⁸Gleysteen (1999, 17). Other reasons account for Carter's proposed withdrawal policy. As Niksch (1981, 25-27) notes, the Carter administration sought to shift its foreign policy orientation away from East Asia and towards Europe instead. The legacy of the Vietnam War informed much of this shift in strategic posture.

⁸⁹Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-13, January 26, 1977, folder: "Presidential Review Memorandum (11-35)", Box 105, Vertical File, Jimmy Carter Library (JCL).

⁹⁰For a detailed discussion of this discord within the Carter administration, see Gleysteen (1999, 24).

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister cryptically told Australian government officials that “there will be war” after the US 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 change in US military posture in East Asia.⁹¹ After all, China saw the US 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.⁹² US allies in the region also seemed concerned about the implications of the withdrawal for the “wellsprings of US foreign policy.” NSC staff member Mark Armacost noted from 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 US policy, then only US “domestic politics” seemed to be the last remaining explanation that made sense for US allies.⁹³

If the international and administration reaction was so negative, then what was the response of the South Korean government? South Korea’s actions following the partial troop withdrawal undertaken suggests an even harsher reaction in view of a complete withdrawal. Yet the content and success of the Ford administration’s counterproliferation policy placed new limits on what South Korea could achieve. The purpose of the following discussion is to determine whether Carter’s announced troop withdrawal generated any changes in South Korea’s behavior.

South Korean Nuclear Behavior Redux?

Though Carter’s plans for a complete withdrawal never came into fruition, his strong intent to implement his desired policy might have prompted South Korea to at least engage in lower levels of nuclear behavior. According to Jonathan Pollack and Mitchell Reiss, South Korea worked on managing the nuclear fuel cycle during this time.⁹⁴ Scott Kemp provides evidence that South Korea even started a nuclear centrifuge program.⁹⁵ Though any such weapons research and development would have been highly secret, the 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

⁹¹Memorandum, July 20, 1977, folder: “(2),” Box 3, Brzezinski Material: President’s Daily Report File, JCL.

⁹²At least, such was the assessment of US 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.

⁹³Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, June 10, 1977, folder: “8”, Box 125, Brzezinski Material: Brzezinski Office File, JCL. In an interesting exchange, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser gave Carter historical context for Southeast Asian concerns regarding US security commitments in the region. He remarked that: “[t]he British withdrawal from the area ‘east of Suez’ was marked by frequent assurances of British steadfastness which were regularly broken. This has generated a certain measure of skepticism toward some US professions of continuing interest in the Asia area ... From the standpoint of stability, confidence in the United States is a very important though intangible factor.” Fraser concluded his observation on a gloomy note, stating that “I’m afraid, Mr. President, I have merely posed a problem; I have no answer to offer.” Memorandum of Conversation, June 22, 1977, folder: “6/11-27/77”, Box 2, National Security Affairs, Staff Material: Far East, JCL.

⁹⁴Pollack and Reiss (2004, 263).

⁹⁵Kemp (2010).

– proclaimed the expansion of South Korea’s nuclear industry so to domestically produce a fuel supply.⁹⁶ One source claims that Park announced in January 1977 his intention for South Korea not to go nuclear. 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.”⁹⁷ Uncertainty over the precise nature of South Korea’s nuclear activities suggests that the congruence test cannot be assessed definitively.

Carter’s plans for complete withdrawal renewed fears of US abandonment among the South Korean leadership.⁹⁸ Interestingly, US government officials anticipated such a response as they were aware of Park’s desire for maintaining 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.”⁹⁹ Nevertheless, within a few months, Ambassador 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.”¹⁰⁰ 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 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.”¹⁰¹

The announced troop withdrawal did provoke new concerns over the incentives for South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons. The Carter administration had already decided that South Korean nuclear proliferation was so unacceptable that it would “terminate” the US alliance with South Korea in the event it would occur.¹⁰² Yet South Korean attitudes towards the bomb were difficult to gauge. To the surprise of US diplomats, one concern expressed by their South Korean interlocutors touched on whether their country would still enjoy the benefits of a US nuclear umbrella. As Sneider related,

⁹⁶ Admittedly, conditions in the global economy in the wake of the oil crisis provided additional impetus for the minister of science and technology’s announcement. See Solingen (2007, 93).

⁹⁷ Ha (1978, 1142). That said, at the time these statements were made, neither the United States nor the International Atomic Energy Agency detected any major effort to develop nuclear weapons when these statements were made. Drezner (1999, 265).

⁹⁸ Cha (1999, 149-152) offers additional evidence of South Korean apprehensions following Carter’s election.

⁹⁹ Telegram From Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, February 7, 1977, folder: “(6)”, Box 39, Staff Material: Far East, JCL.

¹⁰⁰ Telegram from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, April 5, 1977, folder: “(1)”, Box 11, Brzezinski Material: Cables File, JCL.

¹⁰¹ Telegram from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, April 19, 1977, folder: “(2)”, Box 2, Brzezinski Material: Staff Evening Reports File, JCL.

¹⁰² 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.

“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.”¹⁰³

The US embassy in South Korea thus became acutely aware of the need to reassure South Korea of the US nuclear umbrella. Sneider 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.”¹⁰⁴ That the South Korean government signed the NPT just two years before did not seem to allay fears over nuclear proliferation.

As already indicated, the Carter administration eventually decided to cancel the troop withdrawals. Yet the damage associated with this controversial policy was already complete. 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.¹⁰⁵ Sam Nunn was particular vocal in his arguments regarding the inappropriate timing of the withdrawal when the North Korean military forces appeared to be gathering strength.¹⁰⁶ The US military, too, had expressed sharp reservations over the troop withdrawal. To the dismay of the NSC, the Department of Defense leaked politically sensitive Joint Chiefs of Staff cables to the US Congress in June 1977. The purpose of this action was likely to bolster Congressional opposition to Carter’s initiative.¹⁰⁷ The probable actions of the South Korean government during this period also suggest a deep-seated unease over US foreign policy under Carter’s direction. At the very least, South Korea became a more difficult ally. When Carter explored the possibility of having a trilateral meeting with the two Korea, NSC member Nicholas Platt cautioned that “Park would not go along. There is little in such a meeting for him, unless we agreed to stop troop withdrawals entirely.”¹⁰⁸ Even the Japanese government seemed relieved and reassured when the issue was finally resolved.¹⁰⁹

If South Korea did engage in nuclear behavior in the late 1970s, then it is highly plausible that Carter’s stated intentions for US troops in the country had much to do with it. Park’s earlier warnings about the

¹⁰³Telegram from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, June 13, 1977, folder: “(2)”, Box 11, Brzezinski Material: Cables File, JCL.

¹⁰⁴Telegram from Embassy in Seoul to the Department of State, October 21, 1977, folder: “9”, Box 144, National Security Affairs, Staff Material: Office, JCL.

¹⁰⁵Memorandum from Brzezinski to Carter, July 19, 1978, folder: “(25)”, Box 13, Jimmy Carter Presidential, President’s Files, Staff Secretary’s File, JCL.

¹⁰⁶Memorandum of Conversation, January 23, 1979, folder: “(2)”, Box 37, Brzezinski Material: Subject File, JCL.

¹⁰⁷Memorandum from Mike Armacost to Zbigniew Brzezinski, June 29, 1977, folder: “6/28-30/77”, Box 2, National Security Affairs, Staff Material: Far East, JCL.

¹⁰⁸Memorandum for Brzezinski, May 7, 1979, folder: “5/16-31/79”, Box 67, National Security Affairs, Staff Material, Far East, JCL.

¹⁰⁹Memorandum for Brzezinski, October 9, 1979, folder: “(3)”, Box 24, Brzezinski Material, Staff Evening Reports, JCL.

consequences of a removal of the US nuclear umbrella cast a shadow over this episode. Gleysteen's account of bureaucratic infighting within the Carter administration over these planned troop withdrawals highlights how a number of American officials understood the implications of such an action for the US alliance with South Korea and regional stability in East Asia.

6.5 Summary and Alternative Explanations

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

Some readers may remark that bargaining did not take place between the two governments. The nuclear weapons program was covert, and the United States quickly shut down the program without much resistance. This observation is correct, but it accords insufficient weight to the precedent set by this illicit activity. Several years later, when Carter was mulling a complete troop withdrawal from South Korea, the South Korean Foreign Minister threatened 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."¹¹⁰ Indeed, US decision-makers were aware of the risks that Carter's actions created for South Korean nuclear policy, and so Carter's foreign policy establishment revolted over his handling of South Korea. Such concerns over South Korean nuclear proliferation still shape US crisis behavior in the region to this day.¹¹¹

The evidence strongly favors my theory, yet it is important to assess the relative weight of alternative explanations: those that emphasize the sufficiency of external threats and those that emphasize domestic politics. Table 3 summarizes this chapter's findings and highlights the impact of the alternative explanations. I more fully examine these alternative explanations below.

¹¹⁰Ha (1978, 1142).

¹¹¹See Chapter Nine for more on this issue.

Explanation	Predictions for South Korea	Level of Empirical Support Received (High/Mixed/Low)
<i>Alliance Compensations Theory: Onset</i>	Nixon's 1970 troop withdrawals in light of changes in US posture in East Asia should lead South Korea to adopt nuclear behavior; Carter's plan for total troop withdrawal should restart South Korean nuclear behavior in late 1970s	High. South Korea begins nuclear behavior after Nixon's troop withdrawals. Suggestive evidence for the program's resumption during the Carter years.
<i>Alliance Compensations Theory: Termination</i>	South Korean security and economic dependence on the US should imply quick counterproliferation effort in both instances.	High. South Korea was highly responsive to US pressure. It agreed to shut down its nuclear weapons program and ratify the NPT within months of US discovery of its covert activities.
<i>Balance-of-Threat Theory</i>	South Korean nuclear behavior is a function of the threat environment. The greater the external threat, the more likely South Korea would engage in nuclear behavior	Mixed. Necessary but insufficient to explain South Korean interest in nuclear weapons.
<i>Domestic Politics: Onset</i>	Park should not initiate nuclear behavior due to his export-oriented growth strategy	Low. His uncertainty over alliance commitments overwhelms any considerations regarding the viability of his growth strategy. He might not have wanted to compromise his growth strategy, but he appeared willing to do so in the face of Carter's threats to completely withdraw US forces from Korea
<i>Domestic Politics: Termination</i>	Park should not cancel the program so not to appear weak under foreign pressure; no nuclear behavior after democratization.	Low. Park buckled to US pressure quickly, asserting that the program would be constituted should new doubts over US alliance commitments would re-emerge.

Table 6.3: Summary of empirical support for each systematic argument.

Balance-of-Threat Theory

Some readers might claim that South Korean leaders responded primarily to the threat posed by external adversaries rather than unfavorable changes to the level of protection provided by the US. 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, they were necessary conditions for South Korea's nuclear behavior. The salience of regional threats made the announcement of US troop withdrawals even more alarming. Fears of being abandoned, rather than the threats alone, led South Korea to engage in nuclear behavior.¹¹² Finally, for reasons mentioned earlier, the threat environment remained a menace to South Korean security interests at the time of the nuclear program's shut down.

Ironically, the conventional deterrence failures of the United States regarding North Korean provocations in the late 1960s (e.g., the Blue House Raid) were insufficient for Park that the US security guarantee was flawed. US alliance unreliability and US failures in successfully providing conventional deterrence, in other words, did not push Park Chung-hee to reorganize his government so as to seek nuclear weapons. Even though the presence of US tactical nuclear weapons remained on the Korean peninsula, the withdrawal of a troop division was what provoked Park to desire nuclear weapons at last. This observation suggests that something peculiar exists regarding conventional military deployments as a means to infer the reliability of the received security guarantee.

Domestic Politics Explanations

Domestic politics explanations look to either South Korea's economic model of development or its domestic institutions to account for its nuclear behavior. The statist form of development implemented under the Park regime suggests that South Korea chose not to integrate with the global economy. As a result, the South Korean leadership would find nuclear weapons especially attractive for enhancing their prospects of attaining national self-sufficiency. Furthermore, because authoritarian regimes are likely to rely on nationalism as a basis of their legitimacy, they would be tempted to demonstrate their commitment to safeguarding national integrity. Some evidence provides a basis for these claims. 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." In addition, they point to the nationalist rhetoric that extolled the achievements of scientists and engineers working on nuclear energy.¹¹³

¹¹²Moreover, 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.

¹¹³Jasanoff and Kim (2009, 133).

One weakness with these political economic arguments 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.¹¹⁴ Statist economic management affected South Korea’s nuclear behavior insofar as it facilitated the implementation of the nuclear weapons program. With the establishment of ADD and WEC, the Korean state’s management of the economy and its ties to industry facilitated efforts to marshal national resources towards the production of nuclear weapons.

The argument that the South Korean government’s own nationalism motivated its nuclear behavior places the cart before the horse for two reasons. First, 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 much of the 1960s, the government’s nationalist rhetoric centered on economic mobilization. According to Seung-Young Kim, 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.”¹¹⁵ Still, Nixon’s troop withdrawal arguably compromised Park’s stated objectives for national self-reliance. As Ambassador to South Korea Philip 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.”¹¹⁶

Moreover, Park preferred a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy and was not intent on pursuing Gaullist ambitions of nationalist grandeur.

Second, if Park’s correspondence with US officials were to be believed, the sudden announcement of troop withdrawals from South Korea increased the risks to his political survival. The wavering of US

¹¹⁴Accordingly, 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 domestic 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: Hanlim Ch’ulpansa, 1972), .228-34 Translation thanks to research assistance.

¹¹⁵Kim (2001, 57)

¹¹⁶Airgram 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 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. Park continued this line of argument with President Gerald Ford, asserting that “[o]f course, we do not expect the U.S. presence to remain indefinitely, given the mounting U.S. public opinion and pressure in Congress. However, Korean self-reliance must be insured before U.S. troop reductions take place.” Memorandum of Conversation, November 22, 1974, Box 7, National Security Adviser, Memoranda of Conversation, GRFL.

security commitments during a period of high regional tensions stoked domestic turmoil, prompting the regime to use nationalism as a guiding principle in its defense policy.

I argue that alliance politics had a significant role in the demise of the South Korean nuclear weapons program. Still, some scholars who have written on South Korea's nuclear program dispute the causal importance of alliance politics, claiming that Park capitulated to US demands in order to preserve domestic economic development. I argue, by contrast, that such explanations, focusing as they do on domestic politics, fails to explain important aspects of the South Korean case.

Solingen argues that Park was confronted with the stark choice between economic development and a nuclear weapon capability. Because economic development more directly affected his political survival, Park renounced the nuclear weapons project openly and made nonproliferation commitments. After all, as 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."¹¹⁷ The alliance with the United States did matter, but largely insofar as it provided the locus of South Korea's strategy for economic development.

This argument has serious weaknesses. I should state at the onset 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. US economic statecraft 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 not clear why he risked compromising it by engaging in nuclear behavior in the first place. As much as the program was secret, its usefulness as a deterrent required that the South Korean government would eventually become more open about its nuclear posture.

Furthermore, Solingen provides little evidence to show that the returns of his strategy for economy development motivated Park more than alliance concerns. One specific claim she makes is that Park renounced nuclear weapons so not to undermine the country's economic development. To support this assertion, she 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."¹¹⁸ She then goes on to argue 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'."¹¹⁹

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 behavior suggests that for several years he did not regard such activity as a 'waste'. The problem with the second statement

¹¹⁷Solingen (2007, 90).

¹¹⁸Park quoted in Solingen (2007, 93).

¹¹⁹This passage, drawn from Solingen (2007, 93), includes a quote by Park.

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.¹²⁰ These actions hardly were consistent with any stated desire to advance regional stability and obtain positive international recognition.

Other possible counterarguments that emphasize domestic politics would 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 place blame on the United States and rally anti-foreign sentiment to boost his government's national security policies. In reality, Park was more circumspect in publicly outlining his security objectives. Following the withdrawal of the US 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. This ambiguity is reflected in the US government's seeming lack of knowledge of the program before Ford assumed the presidency in August 1974.

When faced with US 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 United States."¹²¹ These statements suggest that Park raised the specter of nationalist motives to build the bomb to admonish the United States for compromising on its security guarantees.

Moving Forward

So far I have analyzed the nuclear behavior of three of the most important allies the United States had in the Cold War: West Germany, Japan, and South Korea. Yet one question that emerges from this body of evidence concerns the generalizability of my findings. To address this issue of external validity, my approach is two-fold. I first undertake a statistical analysis of US alliances and nuclear behavior in chapter seven. I then go beyond US alliances and discuss nuclear behavior among Soviet alliances in chapter eight.

¹²⁰Oberdorfer (2001, 52-54).

¹²¹Reiss (1988, 85-86, 93-94).