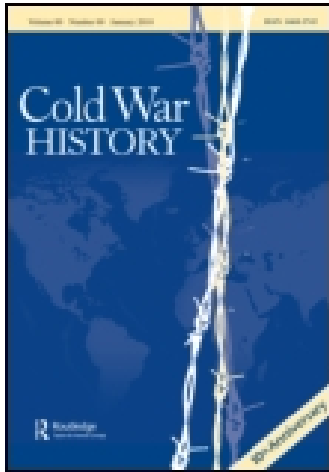


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The first nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula, 1975-76

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The first nuclear crisis in the Korean Peninsula, 1975–76

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This article discusses how and why South Korea tried to develop its own nuclear programme in order to safeguard its national security after the US withdrawal from Southeast Asia in 1975 and 1976. Because Washington did not want nuclear proliferation in East Asia, the South Korean leadership decided to use its fledgling nuclear programme as a trump card in negotiations with the US. This article will demonstrate the process in which the client states of the US came to understand how to negotiate with Washington in order to further their own national interests in the Cold War era.

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, the Republic of Korea (ROK) attempted to acquire its own nuclear weapons. Since the South Korean nuclear project was stopped secretly by Washington in its early stages, the South Korean nuclear crisis has not become as famous as the North Korean crisis of the 1990s, which was publicised by Pyongyang, and which almost triggered an American attack on North Korea. Yet the South Korean crisis is worth studying in order to gain a better understanding of the beginning of the nuclear debate in the Korean Peninsula. The record of political negotiations over nuclear weapons will help Cold War and nuclear historians understand the impact of the nuclear issue on ROK-US relations and on the inter-Korean conflict, particularly in the post-Vietnam War period.

This article will review South Korea's quest for its own nuclear warheads, which tested its long-standing and close relations with the USA. Specifically, this article will discuss how and why South Korea pushed ahead with its nuclear programme despite American opposition in 1975 and 1976. It will also consider the gap between Seoul and

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Washington in their perceptions of the communist threat in the post-Vietnam era. Finally, it will review how the two Cold War allies resolved their dispute over the South Korean nuclear scheme in 1976. This article scrutinises the nuclear debate between Park Chunghee and Gerald Ford in order to better understand the post-Vietnam East Asian policy of the Ford administration, and the extent to which South Korea's nuclear intentions affected American policy making. In 1972 the South Korean administration of President Park Chunghee started to consider a nuclear option because of American difficulties in Vietnam and its impact on South Korea's national security.¹ As American archival evidence indicates, US politicians repeatedly considered the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea after the collapse of South Vietnam.² However, the Ford administration concluded that American withdrawal from South Korea could potentially threaten to undermine American credibility with its foreign allies and instead announced its intention to stay in East Asia. However, South Korea wanted a greater commitment from Washington for its own security interests.³ The nuclear intentions of Park irritated Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who did not want any unnecessary tension in East Asia, and Park thus faced strong opposition from the White House. At the same time, however, the US government suggested an increase in economic and military support to South Korea in return for the termination of South Korea's nuclear programme.

The national security of South Korea during and after the Vietnam War was at the forefront of Seoul's considerations when it began discussions with US President Richard Nixon about the withdrawal of US forces in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The priority for improving South Korean national security was the modernisation of the country's armed forces. This programme had been promoted with American aid, provided first by Lyndon Johnson and then by Nixon since 1968.⁴ Park, however, seemed to believe that another plan, a nuclear project, would be a decisive factor for ROK national security if Washington reduced its military engagement in East Asia. The secret discussions surrounding South Korean nuclear weapons inside the Park administration started in 1972. Oh Woncheol, who took charge of the ROK defence industry in the 1970s, was ordered by Park in early 1972 to secure nuclear weapons technology.⁵ South Korea negotiated with Canada in order to import a CANDU

¹ US Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Centre, South Korea: Nuclear Developments and Strategic Decision Making, June 1978, declassified for release October 2005, p. 1, at: www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0001254259/DOC_0001254259.pdf.

² 'Korea and US Policy in Asia', 1976. 1, US Policy toward South Korea, Box 135, Jimmy Carter Papers – Pre Presidential, 1976 Presidential Campaign Issue Office-Noel Sterrett, Clippings-Foreign Issues, Jimmy E. Carter Library and Museum.

³ Victor Cha, *Alignment despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 143.

⁴ The core of this programme was the introduction of the M16 rifle as a standard issue in the South Korean army and of the F-4 Phantom to the South Korean air force.

⁵ *Weekly Chosun*, Issue 2028, 12 January 2010.

(Canada Deuterium Uranium) reactor and an NRX (National Research Experimental Research Reactor), and spoke to France about reprocessing facilities beginning in 1973.

The collapse of South Vietnam and another victory by revolutionary forces in Cambodia in 1975 spurred the Blue House into accelerating the nuclear programme. The general concern of Seoul was that ‘South Korea could be another South Vietnam’ if Washington decided to reduce its military support for South Korea. This was not an overreaction by Seoul: Richard Nixon reduced the numbers of US troops in South Korea in 1971 and there was a possibility that his force reduction scheme could be resumed by Gerald Ford. According to his speech and diary entries on 30 April 1975, Park believed that the defeat of the United States and its allies in Indochina would inspire North Korea to become more aggressive. His point was correct to some extent: North Korea had adopted a confrontational policy towards the South in 1973.⁶

The two Koreas had undertaken a series of peace talks in Panmunjeom, Pyongyang, and Seoul beginning in 1971, after Nixon announced his intention to visit China. On 4 July 1972, the two Koreas signed the historic Joint Statement to seek peaceful reunification. The détente in the Korean Peninsula, however, did not last long; the inter-Korean dialogue collapsed after North Korea found that it could not encourage an American pull-out from the Korean Peninsula and simultaneously increase political confusion in the South through the peace negotiations. In late 1972, Kim Il-sung was disappointed with the American decision to stay in South Korea, which both prevented Pyongyang’s goal of peaceful reunification and also strengthened Park’s firm grip on the country. The North Korean government announced the termination of inter-Korean talks after the Korean Central Intelligence Agency abducted Kim Dae-jung who was in Japan actively promoting a democratic South Korea.⁷

After announcing the end of negotiations with Seoul, Pyongyang slowly but surely raised the tension on the Korean Peninsula. In October 1973, the North Korean navy started to carry out provocative actions in the contiguous waters off the West Sea (or Yellow Sea) of the Korean Peninsula. In December, North Korea claimed that the waters contiguous to the group of five islands – under the military control of the UN command, off the west coast of South Korea – were within its own sovereign coastal waters. Pyongyang also announced that it would take steps against vessels that entered the area without its permission. Seoul was furious with North Korea’s provocative actions. In 1974, Moon Sekwang, a Korean resident in Japan, attempted to assassinate Park and confessed that he had been instructed to kill Park by a pro-North Korean group in Japan, *Jochongnyeon*.⁸ Along with Pyongyang’s provocation in the West Sea, this event brought an end to the détente on the Korean Peninsula. For this reason, the

⁶ Christian F. Ostermann and James F. Person, eds., *The Rise and Fall of Détente on the Korean Peninsula, 1970–1974* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011).

⁷ ‘Korean Policy Reconsideration: A Two-Korea Policy’, 29 May 1973, Pol 32-4 Kor/UN, Subject-Numeric Files, National Archives; Shin Wookhee, ‘Giheo’eseoGyochkSangtae’ro [From Opportunity to Stalemate]’, *Korea politics and diplomatic history collection* 26 (2005): 269.

⁸ ‘President Park Assassination Attempt, 1974’, 1974, Vol. 2 Negotiation with Japan, Class Number 701, Diplomatic Archives, Republic of Korea.

South Korean leadership worried that US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 and the collapse of Saigon in 1975 would encourage North Korea to take more aggressive action against the South. Pyongyang was inspired by the success of the Khmer Rouge and by Hanoi's communist mission. But the victory of revolutionary forces in Indochina did not result in another Korean War.

According to documents from the North Korea International Documentation Project at the Woodrow Wilson Centre, and Don Oberdorfer's interview with PRC officials, Kim visited the PRC in April 1975 and expressed his intention to capture Seoul under the banner of the Red Army, just as his North Vietnamese comrades had done in Vietnam. Kim requested unconditional Chinese support for his aggressive policy vis-à-vis South Korea. Chinese leaders rejected his idea, which could jeopardise Sino-US relations. Moreover, the Chinese cadre urged Kim to resume the inter-Korean dialogue.⁹ Facing Chinese opposition, North Korea did not undertake direct action against the South in 1975. In short, the victory of North Vietnam did not lead to any collective action against South Korea by communist states in East Asia.

Nonetheless, it was still true that the defeat of the US in Southeast Asia undermined South Korea's position in the Cold War, and weakened the political basis of Park's anticommunist policy. First and foremost, the collapse of Saigon was serious enough to destabilise Park's trust in his American patron. In various media, and in his own diary, he argued the American pull-out from Vietnam in 1973 ruined Saigon.¹⁰ The major concern of the ROK government was definitely American post-Vietnam policy and its impact on South Korean security. Since Washington was not able to guarantee any concrete military support to the ROK, Seoul tried to find its own solution for the inter-Korean conflict: the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Despite South Korea's concern for its own security, the US was not prepared to sanction Park's quest for weapons of massive destruction (WMD), which would run the risk of reigniting the military competition and nuclear proliferation in East Asia. Instead, the US guaranteed its military commitment to South Korea and helped Park maintain his confrontational policy towards Pyongyang. The South Korean leadership opted for American support at the cost of the development of its own nuclear weapons.

The fall of Saigon and South Korea's nuclear programme in 1975

On 1 January 1975, Park delivered a New Year's speech. The 57-year-old president repeated his catchphrase: 'Let us do our best for national security and economic

⁹ Report from the GDR Foreign Ministry, 'On the Visit of a DPRK Party and Government Delegation Headed by Kim Il Sung to the PR China from 18 to 26 April 1975', Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin (PoLA AA), MfAA, 300/78. Translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer.

¹⁰ For instance, in his diary, he wrote, '... by our own eyes, we witnessed that the people who believed that the other countr[ies] will save them and did not prepare to keep their own nation lost their country. ...' This statement could be interpreted as: 'Heaven helps those who help themselves.' Yet in some sense, this also sounds like: 'The other country, i.e. the US, betrayed South Vietnam and did not save it.'

development', which he had presented annually for 12 years. It had become a tradition that the South Korean people could expect in every New Year's speech. As always, he said: 'We are in a *crisis* of national security... The split in public opinion shall result in the invasion of the North Korean puppet regime...' ¹¹ Throughout this lengthy speech, his point was clear: that it was not a good time to talk about a peaceful reunification of the Korean nation. He apparently never considered the possibility that his old catchphrase would lose credibility or legitimacy. In light of the American retreat from Vietnam in 1973 and the crisis of Saigon in 1975, the South Korean president consistently wanted to firmly ingrain his anticommunist ideology in the minds of his people. While tightly controlling domestic political activity, Park quickly developed a new Cold War strategy in the post-Vietnam War period. He accelerated the South Korean nuclear programme to deter the North Korean threat by attempting to purchase facilities for nuclear weapons from Canada and France.

However, Park soon found it difficult to acquire these facilities from abroad. In 1974, India carried out a nuclear test with an NRX from Canada. This nuclear proliferation in South Asia adversely affected the South Korean project. The White House started to question the intentions behind South Korea's nuclear programme and tried to stop Park's quest, which the Americans feared would ultimately result in the proliferation of nuclear weapons in North Korea and Japan. ¹² The American concerns about ROK nuclear research seemed to have an effect on negotiations with Canada. On 6 January 1975, Allan J. MacEachen, Canadian minister of foreign affairs, sent a letter to Kim Dongjo, the South Korean minister of foreign affairs. The letter made it clear that Canada would only export CANDU on the condition that the ROK signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and hence gave up the military use of nuclear energy. ¹³ On 17 January, Park received a cable from Kim Youngju, the ROK ambassador to Canada. Kim reported that South Korea would be able to build three to six nuclear missiles a year if it introduced a CANDU reactor. However, he did not consider it possible, stating: '... if [the US] restricts uranium supply, it is impossible to secretly produce nuclear weapons...' ¹⁴

¹¹ *Donga Ilbo*, 1 January 1975.

¹² Memorandum from Richard Smyser and David Elliott of the National Security Council Staff to Secretary of State Kissinger, Washington, 28 February 1975, Korea 4, Box 9, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library; 'ROK Plans to develop nuclear weapons and missiles', Dos cable, 4 March 1975, secret /nodis (declassified 1997), quoted in Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, (Washington: Basic Books, 2002), 74. These documents suggested that the US embassy in Seoul had studied the capabilities and intentions of the Blue House with regard to the development of nuclear weapons since 1974.

¹³ 'Agreement between ROK and Canada for peaceful nuclear development and application, 1975-77', Class Number, 761.64 CN, Diplomatic Archive, Republic of Korea. The ROK government considered that American pressure influenced MacEachen's decision.

¹⁴ Memorandum from Richard Smyser and David Elliott of the National Security Council Staff to Secretary of State Kissinger, Washington, 28 February 1975, Korea 4, Box 9, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library.

Washington started to press the ROK to ratify the NPT. Despite the negative view of the White House, the South Korean leadership decided to continue with plans to import the CANDU reactor, and signed the NPT on 19 March 1975.¹⁵ Park did not expect that his concession to sign the NPT was the end of Seoul's nuclear weapons programme. Furthermore, he seemed upset that Washington did not provide any solution for South Korean security that would be as effective as his own plan. The ROK leadership desperately wanted American confirmation of its commitment in South Korea if they would not allow the ROK to develop nuclear weapons. In fact, the US allocated about 600 nuclear weapons to South Korea.¹⁶ For this reason, Park did not need to develop a few nuclear warheads that would have required lots of time and money. Yet, even after the fall of Saigon, Ford did not make any clear decision regarding the presence of US forces and nuclear weapons in South Korea, due mainly to the pervasive antipathy of the US public towards American international intervention.

Park's fear of the communists was further intensified by the discovery of North Korean tunnels in the Korean Demilitarised Zone in March 1975.¹⁷ On 28 March, at the graduation ceremony of the ROK military academy, he made his thoughts about North Korea clear:

[...] We should not look on today's South Vietnam and Khmer situation with indifference. As you well know, it was revealed that North Koreans secretly dug tunnels in the many sites of [the] DMZ for their invasion [of the] south after commencing talks with us [...]¹⁸

On 22 April, it was reported to Park that Kim Ilsung had embarked on a visit to the PRC starting four days earlier on 18 April. This report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that Kim had reaffirmed his hostility towards South Korea and the US during his speech in China.¹⁹ One day before South Vietnam's surrender, the ROK president announced a special address on national security and the current situation. Park delivered his words in a determined manner: 'If [the] North Korean puppet regime invades the South, then it will only destroy itself.'²⁰ He emphasised that South Koreans were capable of repelling their enemy if they were united in such a goal.²¹

¹⁵ 'Agreement between ROK and Canada for peaceful nuclear development and application, 1975-77', Class Number, 761.64 CN, Diplomatic Archive, Republic of Korea.

¹⁶ 'Korea and US Policy in Asia', January 1976, US Policy toward South Korea, Box 135, Jimmy Carter Papers- Pre Presidential. 1976 Presidential Campaign Issue Office-Noel Sterrett, Clippings - Foreign Issues, Jimmy E. Carter Library & Museum.

¹⁷ *Donga Ilbo*, 19 March 1975.

¹⁸ President Park Chunghee electronic library, *The Presidential Instruction at the Commencement of Military Academy 1975*, 28 March 1975, <http://www.parkchunghee.or.kr/search.html>.

¹⁹ 'North Korean Premier Kim Ilsung's visit to China (former Communist China) 18 April 1975- 26 April 1975', Class Number 725.31 CP, Diplomatic Archive, Republic of Korea.

²⁰ ROK Presidential Secretary's office, 'Presidential Special Statement on National Security and the Present Situation', 29 April 1975. The tone and contents of this statement are very similar to present North Korean statements regarding its national security.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Despite Park's determined and confident tone, this special statement demonstrated his anxiety. He did not know how the defeat of Saigon would affect inter-Korean affairs and whether it would lead the two Koreas into another fraternal war. Park needed a special measure to save his own nation and his presidency from the impact of the Vietnam War. He decided to introduce a new law to ban communist or pro-communist actions, which, according to his own logic, had resulted in the defeat of South Vietnam. On 13 May 1975, Park released the Emergency Decree No. 9, which was intended to prevent any form of antigovernment activities such as demonstrations, broadcasting, writing, or other forms of criticism against the *Yusin* Constitution, or the ROK government.²² While this new rule demanded the prevention of communist or pro-communist actions in the ROK, the emergency decree also directed the police to punish anyone who criticised the Park regime, regardless of ideological affiliation. Clearly, Park utilised the situation in Vietnam to solidify his position and suppress any criticism of his regime with his 'South Korea is another South Vietnam' logic. Coupled with his clamorous post-Vietnam actions, Park might have intended to demonstrate a sense of insecurity to Washington. On 16 May, through a resolution in the ROK National Assembly, Park urged Washington to reaffirm its pledge to defend South Korea against communism.²³

South Korea quickly improved its relationship with Japan, which was likewise dissatisfied with American policy. Unlike his predecessor, Tanaka Kakuei, the new Japanese Premier, Miki Takeo, believed cooperation with Seoul to be essential for Japanese security, and, during his summit talks with President Ford in July 1975, reconfirmed that the US forces in Okinawa were a deterrent in South Korea as well as Japan.²⁴ Park welcomed Miki's decision and resumed the ROK-Japan high-level exchanges concerning their common security.

Washington's East Asian allies demanded a continued US military commitment to them. President Ford and Secretary Kissinger were well aware of Seoul's anxiety but did not pay it much attention due to their post-Vietnam affairs, e.g. the evacuation of American citizens from Vietnam. In fact, the US ambassador to Seoul, Richard L. Sneider, informed his government both of Park's resentment towards Washington and his growing anxiety over the fate of Saigon on 22 April. He advised the White House to review its Korean policy in order to prevent a decline of South Korean confidence in the US commitment. Specifically, the ambassador worried about the risk of a North Korean provocation to test US resolve and ROK capabilities. In the long run, Sneider was concerned that the US could lose its control over South Korea. He argued that although the ROK still depended on the US, it could no longer be considered a client state. Consequently, he recommended an increase in military and economic aid for South Korea.²⁵

²² *ChosunIlbo*, 13 May 1975.

²³ *The Korea Times*, 16 May 1976.

²⁴ *Department of US State Bulletin*, 8 Sept. 1975, 382–84, especially clause 3.

²⁵ 'Review of US Policies toward Korea', Telegram 2807 from Seoul, State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE, Korea, Box 11, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library.

Sneider's interpretation was remarkable: the American ambassador correctly interpreted Park's anxiety, although the South Korean president had not yet made any significant criticisms about Washington's policies. Furthermore, Sneider thought that South Korea had become a middle-ranking power, and could turn away from the White House to satisfy its security needs if the US failed to make a credible commitment. Specifically, Sneider paid special attention to the South Korean government's nuclear project, and considered that Seoul was likely to build its own missile if Washington lost its influence on the Blue House.²⁶ His analysis was accurate: the nervous ROK president eventually expressed his dissatisfaction with Washington's ambiguous attitude toward his country. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Park explained his idea of American post-Vietnam policy as if he had known about the US ambassador's concerns:

[...] There were and still are quite a number of Koreans doubting the commitment of the United States since the fall of Vietnam. Even without assistance, our people are determined to fight to the last man and not to concede an inch of our territory [to North Korea]. We have the [nuclear] capability, but are not developing it and are honouring the Nuclear non-proliferation treaty. If the US nuclear umbrella were to be removed, we would have to start developing our nuclear capability to save ourselves. [...] If American ground troops were removed, the enemy will be inclined to make a miscalculation, and American promises would carry far less credibility.²⁷

In short, Park plainly indicated that he would develop a nuclear weapon unless Ford promised an American defence commitment in South Korea.

Regarding Park's interview, Sneider sent another cable to Washington a few days later, on 24 June 1975 and warned of future South Korean movements after the Vietnam War:

[...] Our present policy toward Korea is ill-defined and based on an outdated view of Korea as a client state. It does not provide a long-term conceptual approach to Korea, geared to its prospective middle power status. It leaves the ROK government uncertain what to expect from us and forces us to react to the ROK government on an ad hoc basis. We have not for example made clear to the Koreans what the prospects are for a continued, long-term U.S. military presence. [...] These uncertainties lead President Park into preparations which included internal repression and plans for the development of nuclear weapons [...]²⁸

Again, the ambassador had analysed the ROK-US relationship in realistic terms. The reduction of US forces in South Korea in 1971 during the Nixon era, and the American pull-out from Vietnam in 1973 forced Park to confront the US. Sneider wanted the White House to adjust its Korean policy based on the situation at hand. Simply put, his recommendation was to establish a 'durable partnership based on a

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *The Washington Post*, 12 June 1975.

²⁸ 'US policy towards Korea', Emb. Cable, 24 June 1975, secret (declassified 1996), quoted in Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 66.

significant US force presence with indefinite tenure...'²⁹ His argument made sense and clearly identified the cause of Park's deviation from American policy.

However, a major flaw in Sneider's recommendations was that they ignored American public opinion on international policy, and its importance for Ford's reelection. Due to the Vietnam shock, the indefinite and significant presence of US forces in South Korea was deeply unpopular among the American public.³⁰ Hence, this risky idea was not viable for Ford, who was preparing his reelection campaign. The US president was unable to guarantee the requested military support for the ROK. On 25 June, in a news conference, Ford was asked by Bob Schieffer of CBS News if he would use nuclear weapons to stop North Korea from attacking the South. Ford did not answer the question directly: 'We have a strong deterrent force, strategically and tactically, and of course, those forces will be used in a flexible way in our own national interest, but I do not believe it is in our national interest to discuss how or when they would be used under the circumstances.'³¹ However, as Schieffer inquired whether he would rule out the use of the nuclear bomb, Ford reluctantly responded: 'I am not either confirming it or denying it. I am saying we have the forces and they will be used in our national interest, as they should be.'³²

Some South Korean media interpreted Ford's comment as an indication of his determination to protect the ROK from possible attacks by the DPRK.³³ This interpretation, however, seems too optimistic. Washington's obscure attitude did not have any impact on Park's direction. As Shin Wookhee argued, such a gap between Seoul and Washington after the Vietnam War led Park to take more drastic measures for the security of his country.³⁴ Meanwhile, with the White House delaying its policy decisions towards South Korean security, Park continued his negotiations with Canada and France over the purchase of nuclear facilities. MacEachen visited Seoul for the sale of CANDU and NRX on 26 and 27 June. On 27 June, Kim Dongjo and MacEachen agreed on the supply of CANDU from Canada to South Korea. After South Korea had signed the NPT as Canada had requested, both countries signed an agreement stipulating peaceful nuclear development and the application of the reactors to the development of nuclear energy.³⁵

Despite this joint communiqué, Washington still doubted Park's intentions; he was still negotiating with France for reprocessing facilities, which were not necessary for

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 67.

³¹ Gerald R. Ford, 'The President's News Conference', 25 June 1975. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=5021>.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Donga Ilbo*, 26 June 1975.

³⁴ Shin Wookhee, 'Giheo'eseogyochksangtae'ro [From chance to stalemate]', *Korea politics and diplomatic history collection* 26, no. 2: 280

³⁵ 'Visit of Allan J. MacEachen, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Canada', Class Number 724.32 CN, Diplomatic Archives, Republic of Korea.

‘peaceful nuclear activities’.³⁶ According to the record of US Deputy Secretary of State Robert S. Ingersoll, dated 2 July 1975, the White House concluded that the ROK did not need the reprocessing facilities for economic reasons, and that the US should request that South Korea forgo the introduction of reprocessing plants for nuclear tests. Furthermore, Ingersoll confirmed that Park’s interview with the *Washington Post* had revealed the South Korean intention to develop its own nuclear weapons.³⁷ This study of South Korean intentions was delivered to Kissinger on 24 July.³⁸

Sneider conveyed the American objections regarding South Korea’s acquisition of reprocessing capabilities to the South Korean government. It is noteworthy here that the US ambassador did not express American concern to Park directly, since he was well acquainted with Park’s stubborn attitude. Instead, Sneider often talked with the ROK presidential secretary, Kim Jeongryeom. Moreover, he never mentioned ‘South Korean nuclear weapons’ while talking with Kim. His sole request to the secretary was the end of negotiations with France regarding the reprocessing plant.³⁹ The Park regime, however, did understand his subtext. And despite Sneider’s request, the Blue House kept silent and refused to provide any comment on its nuclear ambitions. Ford thus felt it necessary to ease Park’s anxiety in order to put an end to his nuclear ambitions. James Schlesinger, the US secretary of defense, was dispatched to Seoul in August. The official purpose of Schlesinger’s visit – to stop the ROK-French nuclear exchanges – was not revealed to the public. The South Korean press reported that he visited Seoul for an ROK-US security consultative meeting.⁴⁰ In the view of ROK citizens, this meeting was not unusual, as such meetings were held on an annual basis. Moreover, as it was commonplace for Americans to visit the Blue House in order to discuss ROK-US affairs, the gravity of this meeting was easily masked.

Because it was the aim of the US representatives to relieve the anxiety of the ROK leadership, their attitude appeared very friendly at first. However, the meeting between President Park and the US secretary of defense was serious indeed. Even though the secretary did not mention American intelligence findings concerning the South Korean nuclear weapons programme, Schlesinger clearly conveyed that South Korea’s breach of the NPT would result in the collapse of the ROK-US alliance. Without hesitation, Park replied that his country had every intention of meeting its obligations as defined in the NPT. Park, stubborn as always, also remarked that he only answered the question of the *Washington Post* journalist, Robert Novak, about ROK actions in case the US removed its nuclear umbrella. He said he had replied that *Washington*

³⁶ Reprocessing facilities were necessary to extract plutonium for nuclear weapons. Based on Oh Woncheol’s recommendation to use plutonium for a South Korean nuclear warhead, the ROK government might have decided to import reprocessing facilities from France.

³⁷ ‘Approach to South Korea on Reprocessing, Department of State,’ Memorandum for the Assistant President for National Security Affairs from Robert S. Ingersoll of DOS, 2 July 1975, Ford Library.

³⁸ ‘The National Security Council Memorandum on persuading Seoul,’ Memorandum for Secretary Kissinger from Jan M. Lodal and Dave Elliott, 24 July 1975, Ford Library.

³⁹ Cho Kabje, *Park Chunghee* (Seoul: Chogabje.com, 2007), Vol. 11, 274.

⁴⁰ *Kyeonghyangsinmun*, 27 August 1975.

would not remove its nuclear umbrella from South Korea. Facing Park's confident attitude, Schlesinger did not make any negative retort. On the contrary, trying to relax Park during their meeting, Schlesinger said that he foresaw no basic changes in the level of US forces until 1977, and even if Ford was not reelected, the Democrats would keep up US support for the ROK. Despite the American efforts, however, the South Korean leadership did not accept the American request.⁴¹

South Korea's attitude to American pressure demonstrates a very important point with regard to its intentions for the ROK nuclear programme after the fall of Saigon. The ROK leadership considered its nascent nuclear programme a trump card in negotiations with the US; Park needed to prevent additional reductions of US troops from his country. In this case, he might have thought that he could trade his nuclear ambitions for the continued presence of US troops and the ongoing presence of its nuclear umbrella.⁴² This reasoning follows a simple logic: South Korea was not capable of building a nuclear missile in the short term. When Park started to consider the nuclear option in 1972, South Korea did not have a core facility to carry out such an ambitious plan. Park's vague suggestion to the *Washington Post* that 'We have capabilities', was misleading and somewhat exaggerated. As a matter of fact, it would have been more accurate to say: 'We're trying to have capabilities.' Even before Park's now infamous interview with the American press in June, South Korean efforts to build up nuclear facilities and get hold of essential technology were blocked by Washington, which had already found out about the ROK's nuclear ambitions in March of the same year.⁴³ At the time of the Park-Schlesinger talks, Park did not have anything to lose: he could give up his slow moving nuclear project in return for Ford's commitment to keep US troops stationed in South Korea for the long term and maintain the protection of the nuclear umbrella.⁴⁴ Furthermore, his previous efforts and investments for the plan had not gone to waste, even if he had given up on the nuclear 'weapons' scheme. As the South Korean economy grew larger, it desperately needed a more efficient source of energy. Oh Woncheol, the government official tasked with the development of the heavy chemical and military industries, later recalled that Park emphasised the importance of nuclear energy for

⁴¹ 'Meeting between President Park and Secretary Schlesinger, 26 August, 1975', Memorandum of Conversation, Seoul, 27 August 1975, Korea 11, Box 9, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library. Regarding Schlesinger's comment on the Democrats, Don Oberdorfer indicated that he might not have known that Jimmy Carter had begun to discuss the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. For details, see Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 71. Regarding ROK-French cooperation, the South Koreans argued that they were afraid that they would suffer a serious loss of face and pay the penalty if they cancelled the purchase of the French reprocessing plant.

⁴² Cho Cheolho, 'Park Chunghee'eui Jaju Gukbang'gwa Haekgye-bal [President Park Chunghee's National Defence Policy of Self-Reliance and the Development of Nuclear Weapons]', *Yeoksa bipyeong* 80 (2007): 13

⁴³ 'ROK plans to develop nuclear weapons and missiles', Dos cable, 4 March 1975, secret /nodis. quoted in Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 70.

⁴⁴ Cho, 'Park Chunghee'eui Jaju Gukbang'gwa Haekgye-bal [President Park Chunghee's National Defence Policy of Self-Reliance and the Development of Nuclear Weapons]', 12.

future economic growth, as well as for military usage. The civilian nuclear programme was, in fact, eventually realised in the 1980s.⁴⁵ In this sense, Park's provocative comments in his interview with the American press could – at least to some extent – be interpreted as bluffing to steer ongoing negotiations with the US toward a desired direction.

From the time of his inauguration in 1974, Ford had tried to stabilise ROK-US relations, which was endlessly challenged by North Korean threats throughout the year. However, the US president did not provide Park with any firm guarantees. For the White House, keeping a military presence indefinitely in East Asia was greatly complicated by the Vietnam War debacle. Moreover, such a guarantee was too expensive to exchange for a South Korean promise to end its fledgling nuclear scheme. Ford did not consider any reduction of US troops and/or nuclear weapons from South Korea, and might have thought that this was all he could do. However, as Sneider worried, Park began questioning the American commitment in South Korea. He did not criticise Ford because he was aware of the peculiar situation faced by the US president. And although Park did not expect any major changes during Ford's time as president, he did worry about the intentions of the next administration.⁴⁶ His sense of insecurity intensified the conflict between the Blue House and the White House in 1976. In the long term, Park still needed a nuclear weapons programme in order to prepare for what he saw were the potential military consequences of an eventual withdrawal of US troops in the future. Thus, the South Korean leadership pushed ahead with its nuclear project.

Park decided to ignore American 'advice', in the form of a de facto threat, and continued to negotiate with France. The cooperative attitude of his French counterparts further encouraged Park. In contrast to Canada, which did not want to break ranks with the US for the sake of Korean security, the French government did not allow American intervention in its 'business'.⁴⁷ Following instructions from Kissinger in March, the US ambassadors to Paris and Seoul requested the French government and their counterparts (the French ambassadors), to immediately end negotiations with the ROK. France did not waver, declaring: 'If South Korea cancels the cooperation programme and pays the cancellation penalty to France, we can accept it.'⁴⁸ Obviously, South Korea would never want to pay the penalty and argued that the

⁴⁵ Oh Woncheol, *Park Chunghee's neunudukeyeongjeganggukmandleotna* [How Park Chunghee could Build a Strong Economy], (Seoul: Dongsumuhwasa, 2009), 334. The South Korean nuclear plants were constructed in Gori and Wolsong in the mid-1980s.

⁴⁶ And as Jimmy Carter was elected in 1976, this fear came true.

⁴⁷ Henry Kissinger and Allan MacEachen talked about the South Korean contract with Canada for the reprocessing plant and shared their concerns about it in December 1975. See Memorandum of Conversation, conversation between Secretary of State and Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs, 17 December 1975, Korea 11, Box 9, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library.

⁴⁸ 'Korean Reprocessing-Next step', Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 18 November 1975, Korea 11, Box 9, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library.

pilot reprocessing plant delivered by France would be used for academic purposes. Additionally, the ROK government complained that the US had not opposed the Japanese acquisition of reprocessing facilities.⁴⁹ In his in-depth report on South Korean reprocessing plans to Kissinger, Philip Habib, the former US ambassador to Seoul, proposed an assertive approach.⁵⁰ Habib, who had experienced Park's *Yusin* reform during his time in South Korea, believed that Park might do practically anything unless the US showed serious opposition. Starting from December 1975, Habib talked with the South Korean ambassador to Washington, Hahm Byeongchoon, and called upon Seoul to cancel its contract with France, which had already been signed. However, the South Korean government rejected the American demands.

Finally Habib was dispatched to Seoul in December. Unlike his successor, Sneider, Habib was not reluctant to confront Park. During Habib's time as ambassador, the South Korean leader had not directly challenged American authority in South Korea. Understanding this, Habib was determined to destroy Park's nuclear ambitions on his mission to Seoul. According to Sneider's letter to Habib, the former and the incumbent US ambassadors met Park on 9 December in secret talks.⁵¹ Park's position, interestingly, had begun to waiver soon after his meeting with his old American friend. According to South Korean newspapers, Habib explained the result of Ford's visit to Beijing and his Pacific doctrine put forth on 7 December.⁵² The Korean press indicated that the former ambassador had come to Seoul in order to confirm Ford's commitment to South Korean security.⁵³ However, Habib's role was not that of messenger conveying Ford's new doctrine, and the article provided some hints about his role. Why did the assistant secretary of state travel all the way to Seoul only to explain Ford's new (yet old in practice) doctrine? This task could have been fulfilled by Sneider, the incumbent. That is, Habib had taken over for Sneider, who had proved unable to properly manage the nuclear weapons issue. Based on his previous comments about ROK-US relations, it appeared that the US ambassador took a soft stance towards Park. This attitude had not brought about any change in South Korean policy. Therefore, the former ambassador needed to threaten Park. It is possible that Habib suggested possible US sanctions unless South Korea agreed to cancel its contract with France and drop plans for a nuclear programme.⁵⁴ Conversely, Sneider had been

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ 'Korean Reprocessing-Issues and options', Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 18 November 1975, Korea 11, Box 9, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library.

⁵¹ 'Habib's visit to Seoul', Memorandum for the Department of State and Pacific Affairs from the embassy in Seoul, 5 December 1975, Korea 11, Box 9, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Ford Library. The record of the conversation between the two diplomats has not yet been declassified.

⁵² This doctrine formally guaranteed that the US would stay in Asia. For the ROK, however, this was not new: Washington reiterated the same commitment several times. Moreover, there was no tangible plan for this commitment. See Cha, *Alignment Despite Antagonism*, 143.

⁵³ *Dong-allbo*, 9 December 1975.

⁵⁴ Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 72.

emphasising the benefits of ROK-US cooperation provided South Korea cancelled its contract with France, which did not appeal to Park.⁵⁵

Soon after the Park-Habib meeting, the Blue House announced its intention to review the contract with France in January. The new American strategy had succeeded. The prime minister, Kim Jongpil stated that ‘President Park recognised the risk to ROK-US relations if he pushed ahead with the plan ...’⁵⁶ Clearly, to Park, American intervention remained the most important element of ROK security, especially since more time was needed to construct an operational nuclear warhead. Washington felt that it had successfully stopped Park’s ambitious plan after all, and on 24 January, Kissinger discussed the situation with Canadian officials. Canada required the ROK to forgo its plan to acquire a reprocessing plant. Regarding MacEachen’s comment, Kissinger said: ‘We are working with the ROK to soften them up, but I don’t know if we can deliver a knockout blow.’⁵⁷ The US secretary of state replied with confidence, ‘I think it’s safe to say we’ve delivered the knockout blow [to South Koreans].’⁵⁸

Nonetheless, the Blue House did not officially cancel its contract with France. On the one hand, the Ford administration worked hard to pass its bill for military aid for the ROK in Congress in order to appease the Blue House.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the US put pressure on Park once again in May, as the new secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, confirmed the American determination to review its support for the ROK unless Park gave up his quest for a reprocessing plant.⁶⁰ Under strong American pressure, Park was forced to abandon his nuclear weapons programme. The problem was timing: despite Rumsfeld’s stern warning, the ROK elites did not decide when exactly the contract with France should be cancelled. Even though Ford and Kissinger did their best to help Park save face, the ROK leader was not able to let go of his plan easily. In other words, he needed Washington’s security guarantee for the ROK, which Ford had not yet provided to Park.

It is noteworthy that Kim Jeongryeom, the presidential secretary who discussed the nuclear issue with Sneider more than anyone else, did not provide any information about the ROK-US conflict on nuclear weapons in his memoirs. Regarding the same issue, Don Oberdorfer argued that the US still had the power to counter the determined intentions of the Blue House in the mid-1970s.⁶¹ If this is true, the ROK

⁵⁵ Emb.Cable, 16 December 1975, nodis (declassified, 1998), quoted in Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 72.

⁵⁶ Cho Kabje, *Park Chunghee*, 278.

⁵⁷ ‘Conversation between Secretary of State and Canadian Secretary of State for External Affairs’, Memorandum of Conversation, Brussels, 24 January 1976, Korea 11, Box 9, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Information Memorandum from the Acting Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs in the Department of Defense (Bergold) to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Washington, 16 March 1976. OSD Files: FRC 330–79–0049, Korea, 092, 1976, Washington National Records Centre.

⁶⁰ Cho Kabje, ‘Interview with Jaenaeh Sohn’, *Monthly Chosun*, August 1995.

⁶¹ Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 72–73.

elites did feel helpless and harboured hostility towards Washington. Nevertheless, Jeongryeom omitted the ROK-US split in his memoirs. The interesting point here is that he even frequently emphasised Ford's commitment in South Korea. According to this and other testimony from ROK officials, the Park-Ford relationship was not bad at all. At least Park did not criticise Ford in the same way he condemned Nixon.

In a general sense, however, the conflict between Park and Ford in late 1975 and early 1976 was serious enough to ruin their friendship. Still, the US leader did something to close the gap between him and Park not long after their lengthy discussion on the ROK nuclear programme. On 18 August 1976, a group of ROK and UN forces consisting of two US army officers, Capt. Arthur Bonifas and Lt. Mark Barrett, entered the Joint Security Area to trim a poplar tree. Soon after the trimming began, a group of North Korean soldiers appeared and demanded Bonifas stop cutting the boughs of the tree which Kim Il-sung himself had supposedly planted. The US officer ignored the North Korean instructions, leading the angry Korean People's Army (KPA) officer, Lieutenant Park Chul, to send one of his subordinates to call in reinforcements. Even as additional KPA soldiers arrived on the scene, carrying clubs and crowbars as weapons, Bonifas still did not stop his work. In the fight that ensued, KPA soldiers beat Bonifas and Barrett to death with an axe and injured South Korean soldiers and the remaining American soldiers.⁶² This incident, though probably unplanned, deepened the conflict between the two Koreas and provoked a renewed American commitment to South Korea.⁶³

Earlier North Korean provocations in 1973 and 1974 led the Park regime to conclude that the incident had been a planned operation by the KPA. According to Kim Jeongryeom, the South Korean government concluded that Pyongyang had killed the American soldiers in order to create an antiwar mood and generate popular support for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea before the American presidential election in November.⁶⁴ The military conflict between the two Koreas in August had pushed the previous conflicts between South Korea and the US aside. This finally gave Washington an opportunity to prove its commitment to South Korean security and hence contributed to the end of Seoul's nuclear plan.

Pyongyang did not expect any serious response from Washington since the DPRK had never been punished by the US, and/or by the ROK forces for its provocative actions against them in the past. Yet this time was totally different. Even before the furious Park had offered an invitation, the US ambassador and the commander of US

⁶² Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, 74–83.

⁶³ Charles K. Armstrong, 'Juche And North Korea's Global Aspirations', North Korea International Documentation Project, Working Paper 1, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (2009)

⁶⁴ Kim Jeongryeom, *Cheobinguk'eseo seonjingukmunteok'ggaji [From the Poorest Country to the Entrance of a Developed Country]*, (Seoul: Random House Chungang, 2006), 442. However, according to East German foreign documents, the incident was not planned, and Pyongyang did not intend to provoke the US because it wanted direct talks with Washington. See 'Report on the "Axe Murder Incident" from the GDR Embassy in North Korea', 31 August 1976, Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office, Berlin (PolA AA), MfAA. Translated for NKIDP by Bernd Schaefer.

forces in Korea, Richard Stillwell, were ordered to visit the Blue House and discuss the incident with the secretary of state.⁶⁵ As he had in 1968 and 1969, Park requested a robust response from Washington. He reminded Sneider and Stillwell of the North Korean provocations in 1968–69 and declared that the North Korean puppets considered Washington a ‘paper tiger’ because it had ignored Park’s request and had not punished Pyongyang. As the two American officials sided with the South Korean president on this issue, it came as no surprise that the White House accepted Park’s call for a retaliatory strike.⁶⁶ Consequently, the South Korean leader became even more determined. On 19 August at the entrance ceremony of the military academy at Yeongcheon, Park condemned Kim Ilsung in a determined tone: ‘There is a limit of our patience [...] Mad dogs deserve clubs.’⁶⁷ Ford did not ignore Park’s fury and its subsequent impact on his nuclear project. The absence of an American commitment to South Korean security might lead to the South Korean leader resuming the nuclear plan. However, Ford also did not want to escalate tensions in the Korean Peninsula that could very well provoke China. As a result, Washington demanded that Seoul plan a limited operation without the use of heavy firearms or attacks on North Korean soldiers unless the KPA made a reprisal attack on ROK-US forces.

A few days later, a joint ROK-US taskforce launched operation Paul Bunyan, an operation designed not to trim the boughs of the poplar tree, but to cut down the tree altogether.⁶⁸ Through this action, Park and Ford intended to show off the overwhelming power of the UN forces to Pyongyang. However, they decided to limit this action without introducing any heavy arms in order to prevent an escalation of tensions.⁶⁹ In the morning hours of 21 August, without prior notice to the DPRK, a group of US engineers arrived on the site of the DMZ and cut down the tree. A 30-man security platoon with pistols, and 64 ROK special forces, all experts in *tae kwon do*, observed the task and monitored the North Korean side. Needless to say, this small-scale action was limited to the DMZ in accordance with the Korean armistice agreement. Behind the scenes, the ROK and US Army, Navy and Air Force were standing by to provide support. In this tense moment, at 7:00 am, the engineers started to cut the poplar tree, the cause of the axe murder incident, with chainsaws and axes. At that exact moment, Kim Jeongryeom was waiting for a report from the ROK army. Stillwell had told him that the tree could be cut down within five minutes. But there was no news from the DMZ until 7:20 am. At that time, Kim was told that 150 KPA soldiers had gathered across from the poplar tree. If the North Koreans made any

⁶⁵ ‘Meeting with President Park’, Telegram 206084 From the Department of State to the Embassy in the Republic of Korea, 19 August 1976, 0110Z, Korea, Box 10, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library.

⁶⁶ Kim Jeongryeom, *From the Poorest Country to the Entrance of a Developed Country*, 443–444.

⁶⁷ *Dong-a Ilbo*, 20 August 1976.

⁶⁸ Paul Bunyan is a mythical lumberjack in North American tradition.

⁶⁹ Yet Kim Jeongryeom indicated that Park intended to advance to Gaesung if the DPRK escalated the tension. In fact, the ROK forces hid firearms below their vehicles. See Kim Jeongryeom, *From the Poorest Country to the Entrance of a Developed Country*, 446.

action to engage the engineers, the second Korean War or WWIII could start. Fortunately, however, the North Koreans were just watching. At 7:55 am, the combined ROK-US forces completed their task and even removed unauthorised North Korean guard posts. As the operation concluded without any interference, Kim Jeongryeom saw that Park had clenched his fists.⁷⁰

This show of force may have come as a shock for Kim Ilsung, who had not experienced South Korea's revenge for his military provocations in the past. The North Korean leadership did not consider the impact of the ROK's nuclear project on US policy. Indeed, it is unlikely that they knew about the secret negotiations between Seoul and Washington. Even though Seoul was forced to forgo the nuclear weapons programme, this agreement was sustainable only as long as the US provided a considerable military deterrent.⁷¹ Ford needed to demonstrate how much the US was committed to South Korea's security at the moment.

In addition, poor relations between Washington and Beijing also affected the American decision. In the Nixon era, the US was very reluctant to intervene in the inter-Korean conflict so as not to irritate PRC leaders. Yet, as Victor Cha has indicated, this détente mood did not last long: Ford did not make any progress in Sino-US diplomacy even though he visited Beijing in December 1975.⁷² His Pacific doctrine, announced after his visit to China, suggested a setback in Sino-US relations. He proclaimed American determination to keep close relations with its allies in East Asia including Taiwan. Thus, this new US doctrine was not welcomed by Chinese leaders. The latent tension between Washington and Beijing undermined the détente mood, along with the US defeat in Vietnam. The US president did not intend to provoke the PRC. But he did not ignore North Korea's attack on American military officials in the South.⁷³ Additionally, Washington also had to take into account the particular sensitivities and requirements of Japan, Taiwan, and its other allies in managing this incident. The axe murder incident was the first military conflict between the southern capitalists and northern communists since Ford's doctrine had entered into force. There is no doubt that Washington's Asian partners kept a close eye on the American reaction to this incident. For various reasons, the White House could not ignore these troubles.

Against his will, Kim Ilsung made arrangements for Ford to relieve the anxiety of the stubborn South Korean president and other Asian partners. Kim decided to calm his

⁷⁰ Kim Jeongryeom, *From the Poorest Country to the Entrance of a Developed Country*, 445.

⁷¹ This statement can be proved by historical fact: Park revived his nuclear plan after Carter urged the withdrawal of US armed forces from South Korea.

⁷² Cha, *Alignment despite Antagonism*, 143.

⁷³ Considering the limited operation, the US did not want to escalate the tension more than it could control. In other words, Washington did not expect PRC intervention in this conflict between the DPRK and the ROK-US unless the UN soldiers used heavy firearms. The intention of the US was revealed by Stillwell's rage after the mission was completed. The US commander got angry when he became aware that the ROK special forces were armed with rifles and grenades, hidden below vehicles before the operation was launched. See *New Daily*, 'Interview with Park Huido', 25 November 2009. <http://www.newdaily.co.kr/news/article.html?no=36779>.

enemy down. After the military action was over, on the afternoon of 21 August, Kim Ilsung sent a message to US forces:

It was a good thing that no big incident occurred at Panmunjom for a long period. However, it is regrettable that an incident occurred in the Joint Security Area, Panmunjom this time. An effort must be made so that such incidents do not recur in the future. For this purpose both sides should make efforts. We urge your side to prevent the provocation. Our side will never provoke first, but take self-defensive measures only when provocation occurs. This is our consistent stand.⁷⁴

The supreme commander of the KPA did not apologise for the death of the American official when his message was delivered to Stillwell. But the Park regime was satisfied with Kim's subdued reaction. Kim Jeongryeom called this military and diplomatic victory the first humiliation of Kim Ilsung since the Korean War.⁷⁵ Park was glad and rewarded the special forces generously.⁷⁶ The axe murder in Panmunjom, and the subsequent Paul Bunyan operation, demonstrated Park's steadfast anticommunist attitude and illustrated continued American support for his policy stance, even after the collapse of South Vietnam. Before long, Seoul gave up on the plan to purchase a reprocessing plant from France. It is not exact to say that Park was convinced the national security of the ROK was due to this military success. However, it is possible that the political support from the Ford administration contributed to his decision. It is not clear when exactly South Korea signed away its nuclear weapons programme. However, according to a Sneider-Scowcroft meeting in White House on 15 September, the ROK cancelled its contract with France, informing Sneider before mid-September 1976.

Sneider, however, suggested that this might not be the end, due to Park's stubborn nature.⁷⁷ Considering the timing of the ROK's decision, the success of the joint ROK-US operation did help ROK elites give up their programme for nuclear weapons, and nuclear energy was only allowed for real 'peace purposes' in South Korea. Ryu Byounghyun, the director of the Joint Chiefs at that time, recalled that the ROK president clearly ordered him to stop developing nuclear weapons. And Park did not make any other attempt to secure plutonium, i.e. to import the radioactive material secretly.⁷⁸ Therefore, Park's confidence in the American commitment to South Korean security had been restored. Regarding its Northern policy, the ROK leadership gained confidence with its military success, and maintained its hostility toward the DPRK.

⁷⁴ Reed R Probst, *Negotiating With the North Koreans: The U.S. Experience at Panmunjom* (Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 1977). Retrieved 17 December 2009.

⁷⁵ Kim Jeongryeom, *From the Poorest Country to the Entrance of a Developed Country*, 445.

⁷⁶ *New Daily*, 'Interview with Park Huido', 25 November 2009. <http://www.newdaily.co.kr/news/article.html?no=36779>.

⁷⁷ Memorandum of Conversation of Brent Scowcroft, Richard Sneider, William Gleysteen, 15 September 1976, Korea 19, Box 10, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, National Security Adviser, Ford Library. Gleysteen sent the memorandum of the conversation to Scowcroft under a covering memorandum, of 17 September, recommending his approval, which Scowcroft initialed.

⁷⁸ Cho Kabje, *Park Chunghee*, 282.

And although Park had never scored any significant victory in the inter-Korean conflict before 1976, along with the North Korean aggression, this triumphant atmosphere in South Korea further promoted anticommunist sentiment throughout the country.

In the aftermath of the US's defeat in the Vietnam War, Seoul urgently sought to shore up its national security. The development of nuclear energy for military purposes was at the core of South Korean security conceptions during this era. Since 1974, when India successfully tested a nuclear weapon for the first time, the US had paid increased attention to similar development efforts in other countries, including South Korea. Washington had monitored South Korean efforts for its own nuclear missile since March 1975. As the nuclear plan was revealed, the ROK changed its original plan. The ultimate goal of ROK policy was not the possession of nuclear weapons in and of itself, but the effect this would have for increasing national security. Without any doubt, as long as Washington rejected a South Korean nuclear programme, it was almost impossible for the ROK to have its own warheads. Consequently, Park declared his readiness to develop nuclear weapons unless the US provided him with a concrete, and better, security programme. But Ford was not able to reinforce US support for South Korea due to the antiwar atmosphere in his country. As a result, the ROK-US negotiations were not concluded in 1975. Yet the signature of the contract to obtain a reprocessing plant pushed the US to change its strategy: Habib, who knew Park's stubborn nature, advocated a stern approach to the ROK in the late 1975 and early 1976. Park had to reconsider his cooperation with the French government, which could jeopardise the partnership with Ford. Still, he delayed the decision to cancel the contract despite mounting US pressure. He needed American security guarantees to replace his nuclear programme. In this situation, the murder in the demilitarised zone opened a new phase in the ROK-US negotiations. Washington helped Park punish North Korea for its violence in the DMZ. Even though operation Paul Bunyan was a fairly limited military action, the American support for Park's hostile Northern policy saved him embarrassment and reinforced his political stature, relieving his anxiety about national security. South Korea could keep its close ties with the US and prevent a major security crisis after the collapse of Saigon.

However, the union between Park and Ford did not last long. Park soon faced the most serious conflict with Washington since they had established diplomatic relations. Towards the end of the Ford administration, South Korea's illegal lobby organisation to the US Congress was revealed. Along with the suppression of human rights by the Park regime, this political crime damaged his moral legitimacy as a key partner of the US. Consequently, in November 1976, when Jimmy Carter was elected president, he began to criticise Park's despotic rule. Moreover, he advocated the withdrawal of US armed forces from the ROK as he had repeatedly promised during his election campaign. The new American leader broke the commitment in South Korea that Ford had made. And, as a result, Park tried to revive his old nuclear project in the late 1970s in order to check Carter's pull-out policy.

The first Korean nuclear crisis in 1975 and 1976 demonstrated a split between Seoul and Washington in their Cold War campaign in the post-Vietnam era as well as the end of détente in East Asia. US hardship and defeat in the Vietnam War in the early and mid-1970s pushed South Korea to develop its military power to protect itself. Park believed that he could thwart the North Korean threat with nuclear weapons even if the US withdrew its forces from South Korea. In some sense, the South Korean nuclear programme was an alternative card to play in place of US forces and US nuclear warheads stationed in South Korea. Once the programme was halted by Washington, the South Korean leader used the programme as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with Ford over the US military commitment in Korea. Although the South Korean leadership was not able to acquire nuclear warheads, it successfully retained the American military commitment, particularly since Washington did not want to lose its influence in the East Asia. Despite its defeat in Southeast Asia, Washington maintained its military intervention in the Korean Peninsula. South Korea was inspired by its victory against North Korea in the DMZ and kept engaging in its war against communism. The US post-Vietnam objectives resulted in the immediate breaking of the American commitment to South Korea once Carter took office. Considering its potential influence, the South Korean nuclear plan was a useful card in negotiations with Washington that could have been effective for the prevention of an American military pull-out from the Korean Peninsula. However, once the South Korean elites gave up the card, the US resumed its discussions on its withdrawal from South Korea. Responding to Carter's threat, the South Koreans thus resumed their nuclear project and negotiations with France for the acquisition of reprocessing facilities. In a nutshell, South Korea's decision to stop its nuclear programme in 1976 was too hasty with respect to the larger objective of retaining America's commitment to South Korean national security.