



Kissinger State Department Insisted that South Koreans Break Contract with French for Reprocessing Plant

Ambassador Richard Sneider meeting with President Park Chung-hee at the Blue House, undated (Photo courtesy of Daniel Charles Sneider)

Published: Apr 9, 2019
Briefing Book #668

Edited by William Burr

For more information, contact:
202-994-7000 or nsarchiv@gwu.edu

State Department Cautioned that “Normal Reactor Grade Plutonium Could be Used in ... Bomb Designs”

New Documents on the Secret U.S.-South Korean Nuclear Controversy, 1975-1976

Washington, D.C., April 10, 2019 — South Korea’s bid to acquire a nuclear weapons capability posed a complex challenge to the Ford administration during the mid-1970s, according to recently declassified documents posted today by the National Security Archive at The George Washington University.

The new records provide fresh details about Washington's ultimately successful response, which was to press the Park Chung-hee dictatorship persistently to break a contract with France for a plant that could provide plutonium for a nuclear weapon. According to one of the documents, the Koreans tried to argue that the proposed plant would not produce "weapons grade" plutonium, but the State Department countered that "normal reactor grade plutonium could be used in sophisticated bomb designs or ... even in less sophisticated weapons."

The South Korea case is of interest as one of several nonproliferation concerns at the time and for its illustration of the range of security, diplomatic, and political tests that have confronted different U.S. administrations in the nuclear sphere.

The National Security Archive obtained the documents from the U.S. National Archives through the Mandatory Declassification Review process.

* * * * *

Kissinger State Department Insisted that South Koreans Break Contract with French for Reprocessing Plant

by William Burr

Recently declassified documents shed new light on the Ford administration's persistent effort during 1975-1976 to stop South Korean President Park Chung-hee's attempt to acquire a nuclear weapons capability. Central to the then-secret diplomatic confrontation were South Korean plans to acquire a reprocessing plant that could turn spent nuclear reactor fuel into plutonium. Seoul claimed that the plutonium produced by a reprocessing plant South Korea planned to purchase from France would not be "weapons grade" but the State Department pushed back, dismissing the contention. According to a message signed by Henry Kissinger, "normal reactor grade plutonium could be used in sophisticated bomb designs or, at the cost of some uncertainty in yield, even in less sophisticated weapons."

Documents being made available through the declassification process continue to expand our understanding of this important episode in the history of nuclear proliferation. The National Security Archive has posted a number of such records in prior Electronic Briefing Books (see links on left), exploring the mix of regional security concerns, alliance politics, and other factors that routinely complicate international efforts at enforcing nuclear nonproliferation. Related documents convey U.S. interest in a regional reprocessing center to give both Seoul and Tokyo alternatives to their national reprocessing plans.

Among the topics of the new documents in today's posting are:

- *State Department instructions to the U.S. Embassy to persuade the South Koreans to reverse President Park's decision to acquire the reprocessing plant, which "we recognize is [a] difficult decision for ROKG."*

- *Discussions of a regional reprocessing facility for East Asia, which was conceptualized partly to give the Japanese government a “clear signal that ... there may be a regional alternative to their building a national production-scale reprocessing plant.”*
- *The debate in early January 1976 between the State Department and the Embassy over how firmly the latter should press Seoul to cancel the contract with the French, with the State Department insisting that Ambassador Sneider demand “early” cancellation as a condition for further talks on nuclear cooperation.*
- *Ambassador Richard Sneider’s concern, expressed the following year, about “evidence of ignorance at very senior ... levels [of the South Korean government] of either costs or risks involved in the weapons development program over and above seriously adverse impact on U.S. relationship.”*

The new documents illuminate the difficulties and complexities that the Ford administration faced in meeting its nuclear nonproliferation goals. South Korea was not close to acquiring nuclear weapons because it lacked the technological basis, including such facilities as a reprocessing plant. Yet it took the cooperation of allies and months of diplomacy and quiet, sometimes intense, pressure, to induce Seoul to walk away from its reprocessing deal with the French. That South Korea was a close ally gave Washington some leverage in encouraging it to cancel, but without low-key pressure from Canada and France’s support for a decision by Seoul to do so, that leverage might not have been decisive.

As much as has been declassified on the nuclear negotiations with South Korea, there is more to be learned on how the end-game played out in December and January 1976.

Important messages between State and the U.S. embassies in Seoul and Paris remain under declassification review at the State Department. Moreover, intelligence reports on the subject, requested by the Archive’s Nuclear Vault project, have yet to be declassified; for example, an important January 1975 interagency intelligence analysis is currently under appeal at the CIA.

Note: All of the telegram posted today were identified in the indexes of State Department “Electronic Telegram Withdrawal Cards” posted on the National Archives’ [Access to Archival Databases](#) (AAD). The National Declassification Center at the National Archives declassified them in response to mandatory declassification review requests by the National Security Archive.

Read the documents



[Document 01](#)

[U.S. Embassy to Canada Telegram 1421 to State Department, “Purchase of Canadian CANDU Reactor,” 18 April 1975, Confidential](#)

1975-04-18

In this telegram, the Embassy reported on Canada's requirement for "additional safeguards" to be attached to the sale of a nuclear reactor to South Korea and arrangements to finance the transaction.



[Document 02](#)

[State Department Telegram 135500 to U. S. Embassy South Korea, "ROK \[Republic of Korea\] Nuclear Fuel Regional Reprocessing Plans," 10 June 1975, Secret](#)

1975-06-10

In this long message signed by Kissinger, the State Department supported a "more open discussion" about reprocessing with the South Koreans as well as talks with the French about their deal with Seoul. Whatever motivated Seoul's interest in a reprocessing capability "it will in fact increase their nuclear weapons potential." Despite the South Korean argument that their proposed reactor and reprocessing plant would not produce weapons-grade plutonium, according to the State Department, "normal reactor grade plutonium could be used in sophisticated bomb designs or, at the cost of some uncertainty in yield, even in less sophisticated weapons." [1] In light of U.S. concern about Seoul's nuclear intentions, "we would be concerned about the immediate physical access to weapon material that a reprocessing plant would give the ROK."

With a meeting of the Nuclear Suppliers Group coming up in London, the Department supported discussions with the French about U.S. "special concerns" over Korea so that they would understand that "we are not seeking commercial advantage in expressing to the ROKG our disapproval." If the French emphasize the importance of contractual obligations, "we would seek their consent to Korea's withdrawing from the contract." In general, the U.S. position was that the export of reprocessing technology was "especially sensitive" and that if "such assistance is provided the facility involved should be multinational with full participation by the supplier in management and operations."

The purpose of the proposed approach to South Korea would be to "impress on [it] the potentially serious repercussions of [tts] present reprocessing plans." Especially concerning was that Seoul was "proceeding with its proposed pilot plant or conducting detailed planning for larger plants in the absence of close consultation with other concerned countries, especially Japan." From the State Department perspective, any reprocessing plant in Northeast Asia had to be located outside of South Korea; it would be [imprudent](#) to otherwise. From the perspective of Japanese nuclear power expert Ryukichi Imai it was "[too](#) risky" for reprocessing to occur in South Korea.



Document 03

State Department Telegram 195214 to U.S. Embassy South Korea, "ROK Nuclear Fuel Reprocessing Plans," 16 August 1975, Secret

1975-08-16

Previously published in excised form, the new information in the full version of this telegram is the precis of the Nuclear Suppliers Group discussions in paragraph 2. With the Canadians and the French fully supporting a U.S. initiative to forestall the Korean reprocessing plant, the State Department advised ambassador Sneider that it was "timely to execute [the] second phase of [the] approach." The ambassador was to convey "serious concern" about South Korea's plans to develop a reprocessing facility. Even a pilot plant could have "destabilizing" implications for the region. Noting that it was "expensive, complicated, and risky" to build a national plant, the U.S. government was willing to support talks for a multinational reprocessing facility if other countries in the region, such as Japan, agreed that it was commercially necessary. Sneider could also warn the ROK that Congress would reject Eximbank loans to underwrite nuclear reactors for the ROK should the latter go ahead with its reprocessing plans.



Document 04

State Department Telegram 226011 to U.S. Embassy South Korea, "ROK Nuclear Fuel Reprocessing Plans," 22 September 1975, Secret, excised copy

1975-09-22

In light of consistently adverse responses from various quarters of the South Korean government to U.S. statements of concern, the State Department instructed the Embassy to take a formal approach to the ROK based on talking points in the message and those previously approved. With apprehension about the implications of even a small-scale reprocessing plant unabated, the ambassador and his staff were to present the U.S. position with the foreign minister and the deputy foreign minister. While seeking a reversal of the major decision to acquire the reprocessing plant, the State Department did not want to confront President Park directly over this problem, which "we recognize is difficult decision for ROKG." In any event, the Embassy should be "certain" that the staff of the Blue House (presidential mansion) "is fully aware of our position." As previously declassified documents, the South Koreans gave an "unequivocally negative" response to the demarche.



Document 05

State Department Telegram 285359 to U.S. Embassy Japan, "Bilateral Approach to GOJ on Regional Reprocessing," 4 December 1975, Secret

1975-12-04

While the discussions with Seoul were simmering, the State Department was trying to determine whether it could interest the Japanese government in "exploratory talks" about a regional commercial reprocessing plant. The immediate concern was diverting Korean interest in an independent reprocessing facility, but Washington was also concerned about Japanese plans for a national plant. "[W]e wish to give Japanese clear signal that over the long term there may be a regional alternative to their building a national production-scale reprocessing plant." A regional commercial reprocessing plant could meet mutual U.S.-Japan nonproliferation interests, but it would be "jeopardized" if Japan proceeded "with a facility that only serves their national needs."



Document 06

U.S. Embassy Japan Telegram 17749 to State Department, "Bilateral Approach to GOJ on Regional Reprocessing," 13 December 1975, Secret, Part 1 Only, Part 2 Missing from State Department microfilm

1975-12-13

Meeting with Yuhihisa Eto, director of Science Affairs, at the Foreign Ministry's United Nations Bureau, and Koichi Obata, deputy director of the Ministry's Scientific Affairs Division, U.S. Embassy officers broached the proposal for exploratory talks on a regional reprocessing facility. Eto was not enthusiastic, raising various concerns: regional reprocessing plants are "basically difficult" and "all countries want full fuel cycle capability" but it was "almost impossible" to think of Japan having a large reprocessing plant and it would be "close to impossible" to locate a reprocessing center in Japan. Not only did the public dislike nuclear facilities, Japan did not want to accept spent fuel from other countries. Eto asked why Washington was not considering Australia, Pacific Islands, or the continental U.S. for a reprocessing center.

In the discussion, U.S. officials argued that there was no economic justification for a small country to have a full fuel cycle capability. As for the location of a multinational plant, the U.S. government had "no preconceived ideas" about it. Recognizing the "sensitivity" of Japanese opinion to nuclear matters, they observed that "Japanese industry is indeed looking ahead to [a] commercial-scale reprocessing plant." The implication was that Japanese industry may have been confident that it could overcome public opposition to

reprocessing plants.

According to the report, Eto was “visibly relieved” that the U.S. was not “pressing” Japan to host a multinational reprocessing plant. U.S.-Japan discussions of multinational reprocessing and enrichment would [continue](#) into 1976, although the Japanese had [different](#) views on whether a regional center could be located on their territory. In any event, the discussions could not deflect Japanese interest in national reprocessing, despite the U.S. hope that talks on regional reprocessing would be a “clear signal” for Tokyo to take a different path. Japanese disinterest and Kissinger’s strong doubts on the workability of multinational reprocessing kept the issue from the top rung of U.S.-Japan bilateral issues during 1976.[\[2\]](#)



[Document 07](#)

[U.S. Embassy South Korea Telegram 0026 to Department of State, “ROK Nuclear Reprocessing,” 5 January 1976, Secret, excised copy](#)

1976-01-05

By late December, Seoul was beginning to reconsider its plans for a reprocessing plant, but it had not provided a “definitive reversal of its position” by cancelling the contract with the French. Instead, Seoul wanted to delay formal cancellation until discussions with the U.S. of nuclear cooperation had been completed. The State Department wanted cancellation to occur before the talks began and [instructed](#) Sneider to press for it.

Sneider, however, was worried about a “bitter confrontation” that could weaken the alliance with Seoul and drive Park back to the “self-reliance” policy that had led him to the initial decision for a nuclear weapons capability. Therefore, the ambassador recommended that he only express “preference” for early cancellation in order to avoid Congressional ire.

The few security classification excisions in this document likely concern the Embassy’s objections to the State Department proposal that the sale by the United States of the KORI II reactor and the possible cancellation of the Canadian reactor be used to leverage the South Korean government to cancel its plans for the French reprocessing facility. Both proposed talking points, on the Canadian [reactor](#) and U.S. [reactors](#) as leverage, have been declassified for years.



[Document 08](#)

[State Department Telegram 006731 to U.S. Embassy South Korea, “ROK Nuclear Reprocessing,” 10 January 1976, Secret](#)

1976-01-10

Responding to Sneider's objections, the State Department was willing to accept some of his advice, but without drawing back from the goal of securing "early" cancellation of the contract with the French. Wanting to avoid "drawn-out bargaining," the State Department did "not intend to become involved in extended discussions of future bilateral cooperation in absence [of] ROKG compliance with our request." While Sneider suggested sharing some of the blame for cancellation with the French, the State Department pointed out that the French did not want to take any initiatives: "we do not wish in any way [to] jeopardize constructive French attitude." It was "primarily" a U.S. "responsibility to deter ROK acquisition of a national reprocessing capability."

In a point that was more responsive to Sneider's concerns about a confrontation, the Department "fully appreciate[s] desirability of offering a face-saving device to ROKG which would make its decision to cancel more acceptable." Consistent with this, Washington would be ready to send "qualified personnel" for a "set of informal preliminary discussions with ROKG." Nevertheless, "you should ... make clear that our overriding concern remains cancellation of reprocessing plant and that we will not go ahead with KORI-II in absence of definitive decision to this effect."



[Document 09](#)

[State Department Telegram 012749 to POLAD CINCPAC \[Political Adviser, Commander-in-Chief Pacific Command\], "ROK Nuclear Reprocessing," 17 January 1976, forwarding U.S. Embassy South Korea Telegram 0406 to State Department, 17 January 1976, Secret](#)

1976-01-17

Under [instructions](#) to advise Deputy Prime Minister Nam Duck-woo that further delay could jeopardize not only the Canadian reactor but "future peaceful nuclear cooperation," Deputy Chief of Mission Richard Ericson told him that "cancellation of the reprocessing contract was urgent." They also discussed the forthcoming visit by a U.S. team led by Myron Kratzer for talks on nuclear cooperation. When Nam said that a morning and an afternoon was not much time to discuss cooperation, the economic counselor said that the talks were "meant to be indicative and not negotiations" because the U.S. side "would not be prepared to get into details until after the reprocessing facility was cancelled."

The following week the U.S. [learned](#) that the South Koreans had cancelled the reprocessing deal with the French, making possible more detailed discussions of U.S.-ROK nuclear cooperation.



Document 10

U.S. Embassy South Korea Telegram 1226 to Department of State, "ROK Uranium Resources and Development Plans," 19 February 1976, Confidential

1976-01-19

Here the Seoul Embassy reported on recent press accounts of uranium discoveries in central South Korea. The Embassy believed that the reports "overstated" the quality and the "recoverable quantity" of the deposits, but noted that the Ministry of Science and Technology was "pushing development" so that South Korea would have a "greater measure of control over fuel cycle." For example, a Korean firm expected that the uranium could be used to fuel nuclear power plants. The Embassy indicated that it would continue to "monitor" governmental and commercial "activities related to the development of an indigenous extraction and milling capability."



Document 11

State Department telegram 123872 to U.S. Embassy Seoul, "FONMIN Quote on Nuclear Weapons Development," 28 May 1977 (repeated to White House), Confidential

1977-05-28

A year after the resolution of the Seoul-Washington reprocessing controversy, a *Washington Star* report exasperated senior officials in the new Jimmy Carter administration. Foreign Minister Park Tong-Jin reportedly told journalists that "As a matter of principle we should have the freedom to take necessary actions within our ability to ensure our own survival." The question of "nuclear weapons development" would be considered "on this basis." The State Department instructed Ambassador Sneider to caution Park that "any public suggestion" by ROK officials that Korea would consider going nuclear "will have damaging impact in U.S. on bilateral relations."

A few days later, Ambassador Sneider met with Park who [said](#) that the reported statements were "offhand" and had been "both quoted out of context and misquoted." Moreover, Park stated his personal belief that the ROK was not "capable of developing its own weapons and ... would not attempt this course unless U.S. commitment to Korea withdrawn." As instructed, Sneider remind Park of the "strongly held" U.S. views on non-proliferation and the "seriously adverse impact that nuclear weapons development would have on our relations with Korea."



Document 12

**U.S. Embassy Seoul telegram 4890 to State Department, "Nuclear Assurances to ROKG,"
13 June 1977, Secret, Excised copy, under appeal**

1977-06-13

During his discussions with high-level officials about nuclear guarantees to South Korea, Ambassador Sneider may have explained how U.S. nuclear deployments in South Korea and other U.S. nuclear forces stationed nearby constituted the "nuclear umbrella" for the South. Comments by a senior South Korean scientists and discussions with others dismayed Sneider because they were "evidence of ignorance at very senior ... levels of either costs or risks involved in the weapons development program over and above seriously adverse impact on U.S. relationship."



Deputy Prime Minister Nam Duck-Woo who, in the last stages of the negotiations, was a focal point of the incessant U.S. pressure to cancel the reprocessing deal. Washington wanted to avoid putting President Park directly on the spot. (Photo from South Korean Ministry of Finance and Economy Press Center)

Notes

[1]. This was consistent with thinking at the Atomic Energy Commission and its successors as well as the nuclear weapons laboratories. See Gregory S. Jones, [*Reactor-Grade Plutonium and Nuclear Weapons: Exploding the Myths*](#) (Arlington, VA: Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, 2018).

[2]. During a discussion of Pakistan, Kissinger said “I am frankly getting off the multinational concept. I have endorsed it publicly, but in any region you look at it is a fraud.” See memorandum of conversation, “Proposed Cable to Tehran .on Pakistani Nuclear Reprocessing,” 12 May 1976, Digital National Security Archive, Kissinger Transcript, 1968-1977.

[status draft]

[nogallery]

[geotag on]

[publicize off|twitter|facebook]

[category araştırma]

[tags RESEARCH DOCUMENT, henry Kissinger, State Department, South Korean, Plant]