

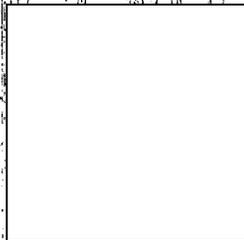
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Thursday May 27, 1976

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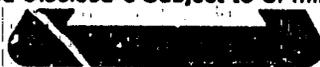


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**SOUTH KOREA**

[redacted] President Pak, concerned about the durability of the US commitment to South Korea, is exploring ways to lessen Seoul's dependence on the US.//

[redacted] /Pak's concern dates back at least to the start of the US disengagement from Southeast Asia in 1969. It has been heightened by the communist victories in Indochina and evidence that criticism of Pak's authoritarianism--particularly in the US Congress--may cause reductions in US security assistance to Seoul.//

[redacted] The most significant consequence of these concerns is the apparent reaffirmation of the Pak government's intention to develop nuclear weapons.//

[redacted] Pak has decided to push ahead despite his awareness of US objections. Seoul's nuclear aspirations evidently were not deflected by its cancellation last January--under strong US pressure--of plans to purchase a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant from France.//

[redacted] According to the latest estimates South Korea, with the help of individual engineers and scientists recruited abroad, may be able to build its own reprocessing plant within three to five years, and, by ignoring nuclear safeguards agreements, it could produce a nuclear device in another year. This estimate is provisional and would be affected by unexpected technological breakthroughs or substantial foreign assistance.//

[redacted] Seoul is likely to move cautiously on the weapons project. Despite his concerns, Pak almost certainly still regards Seoul's alliance with the US as vital and--as long as that perception remains--he will probably take care to avoid antagonizing his only major ally by blatantly violating safeguards provisions.//

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~~TOP SECRET~~ [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] South Korea is also considering increased purchases of military equipment from non-US sources--the UK, France, and perhaps eventually Japan--and is planning to build up its own defense industries over the next several years. Pak has often said that Seoul would approach other countries for military equipment if similar weapons could not be readily obtained from the US. Last year, for example, the South Koreans bought French Exocet anti-ship missiles, and during the past several months South Korean delegations visited tank production facilities in the UK and West Germany.//

[REDACTED] The South Koreans are likely to move slowly in this area as well. Despite the phase-out this year of US grant aid, Seoul will still depend heavily on US support for its ambitious military modernization program.//

[REDACTED] Seoul's arms inventory consists almost exclusively of US weapons and any significant purchases of other arms could cause serious resupply and maintenance problems. Massive foreign purchases probably would adversely affect Seoul's foreign borrowing capability and retard the rate of economic growth slightly over the next few years.//

[REDACTED] The South Koreans clearly see advantages in building up their own arms industry. North Korea's domestic military production is far ahead of that in the South. This has helped give Pyongyang a military edge that could grow unless Seoul substantially increases its production capabilities.//

[REDACTED] South Korean arms production would not immediately lessen Seoul's dependence on the US. Such production almost certainly would have to be keyed largely to the US weapons systems, and it will take considerable time for Seoul to begin significant production of major types of ground and air weapons.//

[REDACTED] The South Koreans nevertheless should be able to start some naval programs soon. A reliable source reports that the South plans to design and begin construction of four 1,600-ton frigates equipped with surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles. The first is tentatively scheduled for completion by late 1979. [REDACTED]

~~TOP SECRET~~ [REDACTED]