U.S. Security Guarantees and South Korean Proliferation Proclivity:
A Crucial Case for Understanding Security Guarantee-Related Coercive Bargaining

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Abstract: South Korea’s relationship with the United States, and particularly the varying security guarantees Washington has provided, have fundamentally shaped Seoul’s civil and military nuclear activities. Policymakers almost universally regard security guarantees as crucial tools to dissuade their recipients from bolstering their nuclear weapons-related capabilities or pursuing weapons outright. The causal relationship is more controversial among scholars, though robust empirical evidence suggests that policymakers are correct in their assessments. But the nuances of how security guarantees affect proliferation proclivity, and therefore of how policymakers might best bolster them, remain underexplored. One key issue that has received little attention is coercive bargaining dynamics within security guarantee relationships. Both providers and recipients of security guarantees employ implicit and explicit threats. Coercion helps explain variation in how security guarantees are sought and offered and how effective they are at curbing proliferation. Coercive dynamics also offer lessons for analysts and policymakers seeking to better predict and prevent future proliferation. The U.S.-ROK relationship is particularly well suited to shedding light on these issues, especially because it features substantial variation in both the independent variable (U.S. security assurances and how these were perceived in Seoul) and the dependent one (South Korean nuclear behavior). The history of the relationship also provides key context for contemporary debates about U.S.-ROK civil nuclear cooperation and the trajectory of South Korea’s domestic nuclear activities.

Introduction

In the May 1976, as tensions between Washington and Seoul over the latter’s apparent pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability peaked, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld bluntly told his South Korean counterpart that Washington “will review the entire spectrum of its relations with the ROK,” including security and economic ties, if Seoul were to go nuclear.¹ But Washington was not the only one engaged in coercive bargaining within what had become a difficult alliance relationship. In fact, the South Korean nuclear weapons-related activities about which the United States was so concerned appear to have been motivated primarily as a way to coerce Washington to bolster security assurances, and only secondarily as a way for Seoul to hedge its bets and be in a position to obtain its own nuclear weapons.

South Korea’s relationship with the United States, and particularly the varying security guarantees Washington has provided, have fundamentally shaped Seoul’s civil and military nuclear activities. Security guarantees are a crucial part of a comprehensive understanding of the past, present, and future of the relationship between Seoul and Washington. Conversely, the U.S.-South Korean relationship is a key case study for scholars and policymakers hoping to better understand security guarantees more broadly.

¹ Oberdorfer (2001), p. 72
Policymakers seeking to curb the spread of nuclear weapons regard extending America’s nuclear deterrent to allied and friendly states as a crucial arrow in their quiver. And scholars have marshalled robust empirical evidence to show that nuclear security guarantees play key roles in dissuading states from pursuing their own nuclear weapons capabilities, though that assertion remains contested by some. But the conventional wisdom about how security guarantees curb proliferation gives short shrift to key nuances by focusing more on the carrot than the stick dynamics of how security guarantees are both sought and offered.

This chapter focuses on the coercive dynamics of potential and existing security guarantee relationships, as illustrated by the opening anecdote. The intention is to shed light on the process, to better explain variation in how guarantees are sought and offered and how effective they are at curbing proliferation, and to glean lessons for analysts and policymakers hoping to better predict and prevent proliferation in future.

Both providers and recipients of security guarantees engage in implicit and/or explicit coercive bargaining strategies. States seeking guarantees or seeking to bolster existing guarantees have some leverage over providers of guarantees, including the threat that they will bolster their nuclear weapons-related capabilities or pursue nuclear weapons outright. States offering guarantees have considerable leverage of their own, including putting broader security, economic, and political relationships on the line if recipients do not accept guarantees and commit not to proliferate.

States attempting to influence the proliferation-related behaviors of others act on an inducement-coercion spectrum; this paper focuses on the coercive end of that spectrum. The actions those states are seeking to influence, and which in turn may influence those states, fall on a spectrum, too, from merely bolstering nuclear weapons-related capabilities to pursuing nuclear weapons outright.

The degree and character of leverage can vary significantly depending on the circumstances of the states involved and their relationship. But in all cases, implicit and explicit coercive dynamics within potential and existing security guarantee relationships involve delicate balancing acts between positive and negative inducements.

This chapter focuses on the U.S.-South Korean relationship over time to try to shed light on how both implicit and explicit coercive bargaining dynamics affect security guarantee relationships

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and the proliferation behavior—across the spectrum from bolstering capabilities only distantly related to bomb acquisition to acquiring weapons outright—they do or do not curb. The relationship between Seoul and Washington is exceptionally well suited to exploring these issues, because it exhibits variation in both the independent (security guarantees and associated implicit and explicit coercive bargaining) and dependent (proliferation behavior) variables. The chapter also provides insight into contemporary U.S.-ROK relations, including the prospects for the signing of a new 123 Agreement that potentially includes enrichment and reprocessing capabilities—and what this may mean for any potential ROK proliferation-related activity.

The section that follows briefly surveys the extent literature on security guarantees. The following one delves into the theoretical dynamics of implicit and explicit coercion within security guarantee relationships. Methodological issues are briefly addressed, followed by a rich case study of the U.S.-South Korean relationship between the late 1960s and early 1980s. The final section touches on recent developments, considers potential future developments, and teases out both scholarly and policy implications.

**Do Security Guarantees Make States Less Likely to Proliferate?**

A rich scholarly and policy literature address nuclear security guarantees. The most prevalent and parsimonious explanation of security guarantee dynamics is rooted in neorealism. States confronting dire external security threats have two choices to bolster the military capabilities available to cope with those threats. They can internally balance by building up their own military capabilities. Or they can externally balance by allying with one or more other states, such that the combined military capabilities meet or exceed the external threat. While internal balancing is more reliable—states can never be certain allies will actually come to their aid—it may entail prohibitive or at least undesirable costs relative to external balancing.

Among policymakers and policy-oriented think tank researchers, the conventional wisdom that security guarantees play crucial roles in curbing proliferation is exceptionally robust. The policy community takes for granted the proposition that security guarantees are key to preventing proliferation and instead focuses on policies that may bolster or undercut the perceived credibility of assurances.

The argument that security guarantees play key roles in curbing proliferation is more contested among scholars. Though the dominant perspective is that they do, a significant number of scholars are skeptical of that assessment.

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The argument that security guarantees can play crucial roles in curbing proliferation is rooted in the assessment that guarantees can not only serve as credible, if imperfect, substitutes for indigenous nuclear weapons, but actually have some advantages over indigenous pursuit of nuclear weapons. While states can never be certain an ally will come to their defense, allies can do much to enhance the credibility of guarantees they extend. And allied extended deterrence can involve far larger and more sophisticated nuclear arsenals than a state would be able to deploy in the near term and perhaps ever as well as fewer of the costs and risks associated with the pursuit and deployment of indigenous nuclear weapons.\(^6\)

The argument that security guarantees are weak or ineffective tools of nonproliferation rests on the assessment that guarantees are necessarily incredible, especially when allies extending them incur risks themselves by doing so—as Charles de Gaulle famously observed, why would the Americans risk their cities in order to protect Paris from the Soviets? Thus, to paraphrase the realist maxim, those who can proliferate independently will do so, and only those who cannot will be forced to rely on external protection.\(^7\)

It bears highlighting that both the outcome or “dependent variable” being discussed here—whether states do or do not proliferate—and the input or “independent variable”—whether states receive security guarantees—fall on a spectrum, even if they are easiest to discuss as binary categories. States may fall, and may progress in either direction, along a spectrum from having no meaningful nuclear weapons-related capabilities through significant latent capabilities to full-blown deliverable nuclear weapons.\(^8\) And states may be the recipients of more and less formal guarantees, from no guarantees at all through the sort of largely implicit guarantees Saudi Arabia currently has from its American protector through the highly formalized guarantees the United States has extended to Japan and NATO allies. Though these spectrums may seem obvious, much analytic work glosses over them.

In both policy and scholarly discussions, the implicit and explicit coercive dynamics of potential and extant security guarantee relationships have received short shrift, albeit with some important exceptions. A recent edited volume that focused on both positive and negative assurances and their relationship to nuclear nonproliferation highlighted coercive dynamics among a large

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number of other factors. And Gene Gerzhoy’s recent article on alliance coercion and nuclear choices makes an important contribution to this debate, though Gerzhoy focuses only on coercion emanating from protector states, and not on the coercive behavior demonstrated by recipients of security guarantees. These exceptions notwithstanding, prior scholarship has not sufficiently focused on the coercive dynamics at play in security guarantee relationships, as this chapter does.

Implicit and Explicit Sticks Play Key Roles in Security Guarantee Relationships

Those pursuing security guarantees and those offering them often engage in implicit or explicit coercive bargaining strategies. States seeking protection threaten to proliferate if sufficient protection is not offered, sometimes bolstering these threats—and hedging their bets—by enhancing dual-use capabilities or explicitly weapons-related ones, such as by engaging in proliferation-related research or the surreptitious acquisition of key nuclear technologies. In addition to implicitly or explicitly threatening to weaken or remove assurances, states offering protection also put broader relationships on the line, threatening not only security but economic and political ties if states choose proliferation over accepting proffered guarantees.

The prevalence and effectiveness of coercive bargaining strategies engaged in by both providers and recipients of security guarantees should vary. Some recipient states will be more effective at coercing patrons into providing security guarantees. Credible proliferators—for political, technical, and economic reasons—should be more credible in signaling that they might proliferate if sufficient guarantees are not proffered. These states likely have the ability to develop their own nuclear weapons more easily, face greater risks if the patron does not come to their aid, have previously been abandoned by the patron, or see their interests diverging with the patron state. Relatedly, states that are more credible go-it-alone actors or those with viable alternative patrons, who might also be more accepting of their proliferation, should also be more credible in signaling potential proliferation.

Similarly, some patron states will be more effective at coercing recipients into accepting security guarantees in lieu of proliferating. Consistent with a robust literature, patrons must be able, both politically and as a function of their military capabilities, to credibly extend guarantees that are perceived as sufficiently robust. Conversely, patrons that can credibly signal threats to abrogate broader security, political, and trade relationships will be more effective at coercing recipients to accept guarantees in lieu of proliferating.

In all cases, delicate balancing acts are likely to be required, because the same factors that can promote the desired behavior can also undermine it. For example, signaling that security guarantees are conditional might shape behavior by their potential or current recipients in desirable ways, but might also foment insecurity that would drive them to seek alternatives, including pursuing their own nuclear weapons capabilities. The two dynamics are not mutually exclusive: fear of abandonment might simultaneously motivate a state to try to strengthen an alliance and to hedge its bets by building up its own nuclear weapons-related capabilities, which is precisely the story we tell about South Korea in the case study that follows.

At least two scholars have explicitly addressed the coercive aspects of security guarantee relationships. Gene Gerzhoy, focusing on the Cold War-era relationship between the U.S. and West Germany, argues in a newly published article that contra the conventional “nuclear dependence” explanation in which clients delegate their security to a patron, insecure states will pursue both security guarantees and indigenous nuclear weapons if they can, as a second-best choice only indigenous nuclear weapons, and only as a fallback rely on security guarantees.11 Since guarantees are necessarily incredible, patrons must coerce clients into accepting security guarantees and forgoing proliferation, which they can do if the client is militarily dependent on the patron and if the patron makes threats of abandonment solely conditional on the client’s nonproliferation. Gerzhoy does not address coercion by the client toward the patron, as we do. 12

It is plausible that given a choice, threatened states would prefer both indigenous nuclear weapons and an external security guarantee, as both the UK and France were able to achieve. But that choice appears unlikely to be available to states today: the United States would put tremendous pressure on Japan or South Korea or Germany if they tried to pursue independent nuclear weapons, and doing so would likely threaten their alliance status, though various degrees of hedging by those states appear more plausible. And security guarantees are likely to be preferable to indigenous nuclear weapons for a host of reasons if they are perceived as credible.

As we will argue in the case study that follows, South Korea’s proliferation-related behavior in the 1970s was a function not of the fact that its leadership preferred indigenous nuclear weapons over a robust American guarantee, but of the fact that that leadership did not perceive the American guarantee as robust. Once the Americans were able to reestablish the credibility of their guarantees, the South Koreans were willing to curb their nuclear efforts. Coercion played an important role on both sides, but perceived credibility remained the crucial variable.

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11 Although both Britain and France were able to obtain indigenous nuclear weapons and remain US allies, it is not clear that others could have done likewise historically or, more importantly, could do so today or in the coming years.
12 Gerzhoy (2015).
Robert Reardon argues in an unpublished paper that the causal role of U.S. threats of abandonment in convincing South Korea not to proliferate has been exaggerated, and that threats to curb civil nuclear cooperation were far more significant. He observes U.S. concerns that perceived abrogation of its commitments to South Korea would have had regional ripple effects among other allies that Washington was determined to avoid, might embolden North Korea, and potentially prompt North Korean proliferation. Instead, he argues that the United States both individually and in cooperation with allies threatened South Korea’s ability to bolster its civil nuclear capabilities, and that ultimately this threat was decisive.

Reardon’s argument is deductively unconvincing: if a state feels insecure enough to seriously pursue indigenous nuclear weapons, why would merely curtailing civil nuclear cooperation provide enough leverage to dissuade it? And empirically, the argument requires Reardon to downplay substantial evidence of both implicit and explicit U.S. coercion outside the nuclear domain.13

Methodological Approach

This paper focuses analytical attention on an overlooked factor in security guarantee relationships, and offers a plausibility probe effort to explore whether and how that factor matters.14 The arguments laid out above are explored in the context of South Korea’s security guarantee relationship with the United States from the late 1960s to the early 1980s and Seoul’s efforts, in the face of a perceived weakening of the alliance, to pursue an independent nuclear capability. A rich single case study facilitates exploring the process issues on which this study focuses.15

The South Korean case is also intrinsically interesting, since it offers a rare example of a country that went relatively far down the path toward bolstering its latent nuclear weapons-related capabilities,16 while under the protection of an allied nuclear umbrella, albeit one it perceived to be insufficiently robust. An added benefit of this case selection is that South Korea plays a central role in current debates about potential allied nuclear proliferation. Along with Japan, U.S. policymakers focused on security dynamics in East Asia are concerned with South Korea’s potential proliferation activity in response to aggressive postures taken by North Korea and

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13 Robert Reardon, “Civilian Nuclear Technology Transfers as Counter-Proliferation Leverage: A Re-Examination of South Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program,” Manuscript (2015) (on file with authors).
15 On process tracing, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences (MIT Press, 2005).
China. Providing policymakers with an understanding of the role that previous security guarantees played in preventing South Korea from developing nuclear weapons may aid them in making contemporary guarantees more effective, as well as better understanding the future behavior of South Korea and other states.

Case study: Security Guarantees and South Korea’s Aborted Development of Nuclear Weapons

South Korea is one of the few countries to have launched an overt nuclear weapons program—seeking reprocessing capabilities and actively organizing a government agency, the Weapons Exploitation Committee (WEC), to develop nuclear weapons—while enjoying a U.S. nuclear security guarantee. While the country did engage in proliferation activity while under U.S. protection, seemingly in tension with the argument that security guarantees curb proliferation, South Korean proliferation activity ebbed and flowed substantially between the late 1960s and early 1980s. South Korea’s shifts in proliferation activity during such a short time frame raise the important empirical question of why the country oscillated between moving towards—and away from—a weaponized nuclear capability. We argue that South Korea’s perception of the U.S. commitment to its defense—as well as the United States’ implicit and explicit signals to either provide or withhold important military and economic benefits—explain South Korea’s halting relationship with nuclear weapons capability. As the U.S.-South Korea case makes clear, the story is more complicated than simply the United States simply providing (or not providing) reassurances and the South Koreans ceasing (or continuing) their proliferation activity. Rather, the two countries engaged in a complicated diplomatic dynamic that involved both implicit and explicit carrots and sticks.

The military alliance – and concomitant security guarantees – between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) developed immediately following the Korean War. In October 1953, the two countries signed the Mutual Defense Treaty, which put in place a framework for military cooperation if either country were subject to armed attack. Although the language of the agreement is somewhat ambiguous with regard to explicit defense commitments, both the additional language the U.S. Senate added on ratification and statements by policymakers on both sides suggest the agreement is viewed as a defense pact commitment.

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18 William Berry, Jr., “Republic of Korea,” in Douglas J. Murray and Paul R. Viotti, eds., The Defense Policies of Nations: A Comparative Study (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988). The language of the agreement leaves some ambiguity about whether it should be classified as a defense pact. Supporting the interpretation that it should not, the crucial portion of the treaty states that “The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of either of them, the political independence or security of either of the Parties is threatened by external armed attack.” At the same time, the US Senate added an understanding to the treaty text that suggests it interpreted the pact as an explicit defense commitment, “It is the understanding of the United States that neither party is obligated, under Article 3 of the above Treaty, to come to the aid of the other except in case of an external armed attack against such
the United States extended its nuclear umbrella over South Korea and stationed conventional forces south of the 38th parallel.\textsuperscript{19}

While primarily military in nature, the treaty also significantly deepened the relationship between the United States and South Korea. Through the Military Assistance Program, to which South Korea had access because of the treaty, the United States provided approximately $6 billion worth of aid to South Korea in the 30 years following the end of the Korean War.\textsuperscript{20} In addition to new statist policies focused on export-oriented economic expansion, these funds spurred significant growth in South Korea during the 1960s and 70s and helped the country prosper economically during those years.\textsuperscript{21} This continued economic assistance—and the leverage it provided the United States—would prove valuable when the United States attempted to compel the South Koreans to cease their proliferation activities.

Despite U.S. assurances and economic aid, by the late 1960s the South Korea began to significantly doubt the United States’ commitment to the country’s security.\textsuperscript{22} In 1968, North Korean conducted an extensive covert operations campaign to destabilize the U.S.-South Korean relationship, including by attempting to assassinate South Korean President Park Chung-Hee and capturing the USS Pueblo and its crew. Despite these provocations, the United States refrained from taking action against North Korea, and such reluctance created significant apprehension within the South Korean leadership. For example, following the shooting down of an American reconnaissance aircraft by North Korea, the United States did not respond with military force. This lack of military response made South Korean leaders “very jittery,” and according to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earl Wheeler, the South Koreans “are apprehensive we won’t do anything.”\textsuperscript{23}

A significant turn in the U.S.-South Korean relationship—and one which jump-started the South Korean nuclear weapons program—was President Richard Nixon’s announcement of the Guam Doctrine in the summer of 1969. In a speech in July 1969, Nixon specified that though the

\begin{itemize}
  \item Fredicka Bunge, ed., \textit{South Korea: A Country Study} (Washington D.C.: Foreign Area Studies, The American University, July 1981), p. 239. Note that the United States has provided South Korea with peaceful nuclear assistance in a variety of areas since the 1950s, including commercial projects, research and development work on safety, safeguards, advanced nuclear reactors, and fuel cycle technologies.
  \item Siler (1998), p. 58.
\end{itemize}
The United States would maintain its treaty commitments, it would ask its allies to become more self-sufficient in providing for their own defense. This speech sent shockwaves throughout the South Korean strategic community, as many saw it as an indication that the United States was increasingly unlikely to come to the aid of its ally. President Nixon, in an attempt to explain the new doctrine to U.S. allies, met with President Park in August 1969 and tried to convince him that the United States was committed to South Korea’s defense. Despite the verbal assurances however, President Nixon subsequently ordered one of its two infantry divisions out of South Korea in 1970.

The announcement and implementation of the Guam Doctrine stoked fears of U.S. abandonment and catalyzed the development of the South Korean nuclear weapons program. In particular, South Korean leaders felt that the United States had provided certain assurances, and that the removal of troops from South Korea represented a reneging on those commitments. As the U.S. policy towards East Asia under President Nixon came into focus, the South Koreans established an agency, the Weapons Exploitation Committee, to oversee the development of South Korean nuclear weapons. During the next five years, the WEC made a concerted effort to acquire the capability to produce fissionable material on the world market, including entering into secret negotiations with the French to purchase reprocessing technologies.

While the South Koreans secretly acquired certain requisite components for an indigenous nuclear weapon capability and engaged in a concerted effort to acquire fissionable materials,

24 Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon: 1969 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office 1971): 544-548. See also Berry, Jr., (1998), Bunge (1981), p. 213. In the remarks, President Nixon noted that “At this time the political and economic plans that they are developing are very hopeful. We will give assistance to those plans. We, of course, will keep the treaty commitments that we have. . . . But as far as our role is concerned, we must avoid the kind of policy that will make countries in Asia so dependent upon us that we are dragged into conflicts such as the one we have in Vietnam.” In a follow-on speech, Nixon further elaborated on the principles of the Guam Doctrine: The United States will keep all of its treaty commitments; the United States shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with the U.S. or of a nation whose survival the U.S. considers vital to its security; in cases involving other types of aggression, the U.S. shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But it shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense. President Richard Nixon, “President Nixon’s Speech on Vietnamization,” (Nov. 3, 1969).


U.S. actions continued to undercut the credibility of the U.S. commitment. During the Nixon Administration, private attempts to reassure the South Koreans about the U.S. commitment were undermined by public pronouncements. For example, in an August 1970 press conference in South Korea, U.S. Vice President Spiro Agnew declared that the United States intended to withdraw all U.S. troops within five years. Following Nixon’s resignation and Gerald Ford’s assumption of the Presidency, the United States announced the Pacific Doctrine, which advocated a similar approach to the Guam Doctrine, focusing on burden sharing. While President Ford provided positive guarantees that the United States would not continue scaling down its troop levels in the ROK and indeed limited some of the troop reductions in the country, South Korean policymakers were unsure whether U.S. domestic politics would force changes in that position in the coming years.

As a result of this continued uncertainty surrounding the credibility of the U.S. commitment, South Korean decision makers decided to develop nuclear weapons as a way to ensure the country’s security in the case of an American decision not to protect its ally.

But South Korea’s actions were also part of a larger bargaining game with the United States. Instead of simply doubting U.S. commitments and proceeding with the development of nuclear weapons, South Korean officials also broadcast that they were considering pursuing nuclear weapons in the hope of ensuring that the United States re-commit to the ROK’s security and economic development. Indeed, South Korean President Park told the Washington Post that his country would actively pursue the nuclear option if the U.S. withdrew its nuclear umbrella. This strategy of going public—which occurred again in the late 1970s—suggests that South Korea’s nuclear activities were motivated at least in part by a desire to secure robust security and economic assistance from the United States—not simply to ensure its security in case the United States was no longer willing to defend the ROK.

South Korea’s decision to develop nuclear weapons did not go unnoticed by Washington. By 1974, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission recognized the WEC’s attempts to covertly acquire fissile material and by Park’s comments to The Washington Post.

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32 Siler (1988), pp. 60-61. For a good discussion of how the Ford Administration provided these positive assurances, see Lanozska (2013), p. 192-93.
34 Young-Sun Ha, “Nuclearization of Small States and World Order: The Case of Korea,” Asian Survey Volume 18, Number 11 (1978), p. 1142
technology, it attempted to thwart the transaction. U.S. diplomats threatened the South Korean government with U.S. military troop reductions and a substantial reduction in economic assistance. Donald Rumsfeld, a member of the American negotiating mission, reportedly told the ROK that the United States would, "review its entire spectrum of its relations with the ROK, including economic and security arrangements, if Seoul insisted on developing nuclear weapons." This concerted effort to both prevent third party countries from supplying sensitive nuclear material to South Korea, as well as to threaten South Korea with the removal of military and economic assistance, appeared to have slowed the country's proliferation activities in the mid-1970s. For instance, South Korea ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1975 after Congress suspended hundreds of millions of dollars in loans and loan guarantees to the country which were intended to support the production of a civilian nuclear power plant.

But continued distrust of U.S. assurances led South Korea to covertly pursue the technology required to produce nuclear weapons. In January 1976, South Korea, for example began secretly negotiating with the French for a second time. However, the Americans quickly discovered evidence of the discussion and again threatened the South Koreans. Likewise the Americans stopped a transfer of plutonium reprocessing technology from Canada to South Korea in 1977, again attempting to prevent the ROK from developing a nuclear weapons capability.

Parallel to the South Korean search for the components—including reprocessing technology—to develop nuclear weapons, the strategic relationship with the United States continued to erode. In 1977, upon President Jimmy Carter's election, the United States instituted a new strategic policy towards South Korea that deeply undermined the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee. In Presidential Review Memorandum 13 (PRM 13), Carter called for a reduction in U.S. forces in South Korea on the grounds that the country was economically stable and should provide for more of its own defense. While many within Carter's administration counseled the President against adopting such a policy—primarily because it would seriously damage U.S.-South Korean

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relations—the President moved ahead and called for a withdrawal to begin by the end of 1978, with a complete withdrawal completed by 1982.44

This planned reduction caused significant concern in South Korea that the United States’ nuclear guarantee was fraying.45 Following the announcement of the policy, the South Korean government responded by re-doubling its efforts to both acquire nuclear weapons and convince the United States that if it did not halt its troop reductions, South Korea would go nuclear.46 In particular, South Korean officials traveled to Washington and led a lobbying campaign to make it clear that if the U.S. security commitment was not fortified, the South Koreans would continue to develop nuclear weapons. While President Carter never followed through on the threatened reductions, the South Koreans continued their low-level nuclear activities, seemingly unpersuaded that Carter’s decision not to reduce a troop presence in the country signaled a robust and credible guarantee.

While President Carter’s policies caused anxiety among South Korean policy makers, President Reagan’s approach reassured them and re-cemented the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee.47 In 1981, the Reagan administration proposed an incentive-punishment deal to South Korea: in exchange for ceasing any nuclear weapons-related research and development, the country would receive a re-invigorated security guarantee. Refusal however would result in increasingly harsh sanctions and a cutoff from U.S. security and economic aid.48 The positive elements of the deal provided the South Koreans with precisely what they desired: an increased, credible U.S. commitment to defend them militarily, including:

Elevation of the U.S.-ROK mutual security cooperation formula to that of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO Pattern); combined training, cross-servicing and mutual support activities similar to those contained in the NATO Mutual Support Act of 1979; complete termination of all U.S. ground, air, and naval withdrawals from South Korea; stepped-up security assistance to strengthen South Korea’s defense industry and armed forces; and increased military sales credits at higher levels and assistance to the ROK economy to help it absorb the costs of defense purchase.49

While the offer of the re-invigorated security guarantee provided the South Koreans with a strong incentive to adopt the deal, the threat of further reductions in U.S. armed forces and

45 Reiss (1988), pp. 92-93. See also Cha (1999), pp. 149-52.
47 Oberdorfer (2001), p. 73.
assistance if they continued with their program provided the country with additional incentives. Given that the South Koreans had sought nuclear weapons because of a perceived dwindling in American commitments to the country, not accepting this deal would further exacerbate that decline. Thus, the decision to shutter the weapons-related components of the country’s nuclear program provided the South Koreans with precisely what they desired (a re-invigorated security guarantee) while preventing a circumstance they wanted to avoid (a further reduction in security commitments from the United States).

The South Korean case illustrates that security guarantees can prevent allied nuclear proliferation. Indeed, prior to the late 1960s, the South Koreans did not seek to acquire nuclear weapons and only when they perceived the U.S. security guarantee as waver ing did their pursuit begin in earnest. It is clear that a re-invigorated U.S. security guarantee in the 1980s did prevent proliferation activity. Indeed, during the 1970s, the South Koreans, perceiving the fraying of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and a general reduction in the American commitment to security on the peninsula, actively pursued an indigenous nuclear weapons capability.

Beyond illustrating that such guarantees can prevent allied proliferation, the South Korean case also highlights the role of implicit and at times explicit coercive dynamics in the security guarantee relationship. South Korea appears to have launched its nuclear program with two core motivations. That program appears to have been intended to coerce the United States into providing more robust guarantees, a linkage South Korean officials explicitly made. And it appears to have been intended to provide a fallback proliferation option for South Korea, should it fail to secure sufficient guarantees.

As for the United States, while it took various actions to bolster its guarantees vis-à-vis South Korea, it also put considerable coercive pressure on South Korea, putting at risk not only the security relationship, but also the broader political and economic one, if Seoul chose to proliferate. The United States was able to coerce South Korea from a position of credibility—although it would face some negative consequences from acting on its threats, it could curtail its relationship with South Korea and would bear lesser costs from doing so than South Korea would. And South Korea was able to credibly coerce the United States also—it could have obtained indigenous nuclear weapons had it committed to doing so. Both sides ultimately preferred a reinvigorated security guarantee relationship, and were able to coerce and induce each other to return to that status quo ante after having deviated from that course.

**Scholarly and Policy Implications**

The coercion manifested in the U.S.-South Korean relationship was substantially, though not solely, focused on sensitive nuclear technologies. Washington has sought to dissuade Seoul from pursuing key technologies—especially enrichment and reprocessing—that would enhance its...
nuclear weapons breakout capabilities. Washington has also both denied and threatened to deny various fuel cycle-related technologies as a way to both shape South Korea’s latent proliferation capabilities and to coerce Seoul into committing more robustly to nonproliferation. Conversely, Seoul has used the pursuit of sensitive nuclear technologies both as a way to hedge its bets on a potential indigenous nuclear weapons option and as a way to coerce Washington into providing it with the strengthened security guarantees it has sought.

The U.S.-South Korean relationship, including its nuclear dimensions, remains in flux. One particularly notable area of uncertainty is peaceful nuclear cooperation. The United States has provided South Korea with nuclear assistance for decades, but as the ROK began to engage in proliferation activity, the United States pulled back on this cooperation. More recently the United States and South Korea have been negotiating a 123 Cooperation Agreement, which lays out the terms for peaceful nuclear cooperation between the two countries. The negotiating period—set to expire in March 2014—was extended in April 2013 for another two years.

At the crux of the inability to reach an agreement is South Korea’s demand that a new nuclear agreement grant the country advanced consent to enrich uranium and reprocess spent plutonium, the two key processes for the production of weapons-grade nuclear material. The South Koreans have legitimate economic reasons for desiring these capabilities: They want to further develop their ability to produce nuclear fuel and have limited storage capability for spent fuel. But their desire for the ability to perform these operations also raises serious nonproliferation concerns, and as South Korea has faced renewed belligerence over the past few years from its northern neighbor, as well an increasingly aggressive China asserting its territorial claims in the region, the ROK may face an incentive to take proliferation measures to protect its security that could capitalize on enrichment and/or reprocessing capabilities.

The past, and present, provide some hints about, as well as some prescriptions for shaping, the future of the US-South Korean nuclear relationship. Our research suggests that, if the United States security guarantees to South Korea remain credible, providing consent for limited enrichment and plutonium reprocessing capabilities should not appreciably increase the risk that South Korea engages in concerning proliferation activity, such as studying weaponization or because South Korea has little motivation, and faces major costs and risks, if it tries to develop a breakout capability or a full-on weapons program. However, the bargaining dynamics we identified also suggest that if South Korea does begin to engage in such activity, the United States will have substantial leverage to quash such pursuits. While the United States may be reluctant to provide consent for other reasons, such as incentivizing other countries to request similar treatment, it should not be overly concerned about the consequences in the South Korean context. But conversely, it bears highlighting that Seoul has coercive levers to wield also, all the more so if it proceeds further down the path toward dual-use nuclear capabilities. The greater South Korean latent proliferation capabilities, the more credibly it can implicitly or even

Commented [AS57]: Would it be useful to insert a para that distinguishes the implications of your argument from that of Reardon’s and arguments related to withholding nuclear cooperation vs. credibility of security guarantees?

Commented [PCB58]: We think including a paragraph on this might be a bit awkward here.

Commented [AS59]: This depends on how measure latency above and role of military significant ENR activities. Need to clarify throughout paper and then refine this point accordingly. In other words, why isn’t lesson that by bolstering US sec guarantees, no need for ROK to possess ENR?

Commented [PCB60]: We tried to clarify here—you’re right that prior to the edits, the language was somewhat circular. Hopefully this resolves that issue.

Commented [AS61]: Explain. How does the record of ROK nuclear weapons activities affect credibility of promises it extends to the US re ENR restraint? What role do the credibility of US security guarantees play in this context?

Commented [PCB62]: I think we’ve already explained here.
explicitly threaten to indigenously proliferate and the better positioned it would be to resist US threats of abandonment.

More broadly, it bears emphasizing that coercive dynamics, from both the provider and recipient side of the security guarantee relationship, do not appear unique to the U.S.-South Korean relationship. For example, even a cursory examination of the U.S. relationships with Japan, Taiwan, and Germany reveal similar dynamics. And such dynamics also appear relevant to the challenges policymakers face today and in the coming years as they seek to curb proliferation, especially in the Middle East and Asia.

Present-day Saudi Arabia offers an interesting potential application of lessons learned from the South Korean case. A number of analysts and policymakers have suggested that Saudi Arabia is likely to proliferate if Iran continues its apparent efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability, and Saudi Arabian leaders have repeatedly suggested as much.\(^{50}\) That prediction should be taken with a significant grain of salt for a host of reasons, among them the fact that what Saudi Arabia appears to be engaged in is in fact coercion to ensure that the United States and others take its security concerns seriously.\(^{51}\)

But how effective is such Saudi coercion, assuming that is the correct diagnosis of its recent behavior, likely to be? And conversely, how much coercive leverage does the United States possess to pressure Saudi Arabia to accept some sort of security guarantee relationship in lieu of proliferating?

In light of technical and political challenges, a Saudi Arabian threat to proliferate is arguably less credible than a South Korean one was a few decades ago, or for that matter is today, so Riyadh may obtain less leverage from its threats than Seoul appears to have historically. As for Washington, although the content of high-level intergovernmental discussions is closely held, it appears likely to have already conveyed implicit threats to Riyadh about the consequences for the U.S.-Saudi relationship should Riyadh choose to proliferate. But given Saudi’s role as the preeminent global oil supplier and the fungibility of that commodity, threats to abrogate the broader relationship may be less credible than they were in the South Korean context a few decades ago.

The bottom line is that in employing and understanding the role of nuclear security guarantees in curbing proliferation, both policymakers and scholars should consider the often-overlooked coercive bargaining dynamics on both sides of those relationships. And such dynamics will


necessarily continue to play a key role as Seoul and Washington manage their nuclear relationship in all its facets, including U.S. extended deterrence over South Korea and Seoul’s civil nuclear activities.