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March 12, 1975

US Department of State Cable, ROK Plans to Develop Nuclear Weapons and Missiles

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Summary:

The U.S. Embassy in Seoul announces that "a more explicit course" is needed to effectively counter South Korea's nuclear ambitions.

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E.O. 11652: XGDS-3
TAGS: MNUC KS
SUBJECT: ROK PLANS TO DEVELOP NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND MISSILES

REF: STATE 048673

1. WHILE EMBASSY IN BASIC AGREEMENT WITH DEPARTMENT'S SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF SIGNIFICANCE OF ROK PLANS TO DEVELOP NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND MISSILES AND WITH THE PROPOSALS OUTLINED IN REFTEL, WE BELIEVE A MORE EXPLICIT COURSE VIS-A-VIS ROKS WILL EVENTUALLY BE CALLED FOR.

2. TIME ROKS WILL REQUIRE TO DEVELOP A NUCLEAR WEAPON COULD BE WELL LESS THAN TEN YEARS IN OUR JUDGMENT AND IN ANY EVENT WE WOULD BE PRUDENT TO ACT ON THIS BASIS EVEN IF TEN YEAR PROJECTION IS CLOSER TO MARK. ROK LEADERSHIP ACCORDING TO BEST EVIDENCE WE HAVE HAS PLACED HIGH PRIORITY ON WEAPONS DEVELOPMENT AND IS LOOKING FOR RESULTS BY EARLY EIGHTIES. THIS IS FEASIBLE WE THINK GIVEN ROK'S NOTABLY HARD DRIVING NATURE, HIGH LEVEL OF TECHNICAL SKILLS THEY ALREADY HAVE AND MAY BE ABLE TO RECRUIT AMONG EXPATRIATE KOREANS OVERSEAS [redacted], AND STRONG IMPETUS FROM THE TOP.

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3. WE ALSO BELIEVE WE SHOULD NOT UNDER ESTIMATE ROK ABILITY TO OBTAIN EQUIPMENT AND TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS FOR WEAPON DEVELOPMENT FROM THIRD COUNTRIES, IN EVENT WE TURN THEM DOWN. WE DOUBT POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC COSTS INVOLVED WILL DETER ROKS VERY MUCH, WHILE ROK PURCHASES FROM THIRD COUNTRIES COULD LESSEN OUR ABILITY TO CONTROL ROKS. THIS SIMPLY BEHOOVES US ALL THE MORE TO DO WHAT WE CAN TO STRENTHEN SAFEGUARD REQUIREMENTS IMPOSED BY OTHER COUNTRIES AND USING JUDICIOUS TRANSFER OF US TECHNOLOGY AS WEDGE TOPCONTROL ROK EFFORTS.

4. FINALLY, WE BELIEVE THAT IN WORKING OUT DETAILS OF OUR APPROACH TO ROKS THERE IS NO NEED TO PUSSY-FOOT. ROKS ARE SERIOUS, TOUGH CUSTOMERS BENT IN THIS CASE ON A POTENTIALLY HARMFUL CAUSE. FACT THEY HAVE MOVED AS QUICKLY AS THEY HAVE RECENTLY TOWARD RATIFICATION OF NPT AND TO ACCOMMODATING CANADIANS AND FRENCH RE SAFEGUARDS IS VERY PROBABLY BECAUSE THEY ALREADY HAVE WORD WE ARE ON TO THEM, BUT IT IS NO INDICATION THEY ARE GIVING UP. TO THE CONTRARY IT APPEARS TO INDICATE THEY WILL BE AS HYPOCRITICAL AS NECESSARY. GIVEN IMPLICATIONS OF THEIR PLANS, THEIR TOUGH MENTALITY, PLUS DEPTH OUR CONCERN ON THIS ISSUE, WE BELIEVE THAT DIRECT, EARLY, AND FIRM APPROACH WILL BE MOST APPROPRIATE AND WILL HAVE BEST CHANCE OF SUCCESS.

5. IF AND WHEN A MORE EXPLICIT APPROACH APPEARS NECESSARY, [redacted] A SCENARIO CAN BE CONSTRUCTED GIVING BACKGROUND FOR EMBASSY DE-MARCHE, [redacted]

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