

Chapter 7

Want Nuclear Controls on Riyadh? Start with Seoul¹

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The Trump administration is on the verge of signing a nuclear agreement with Saudi Arabia that is reportedly “flexible” on Saudi acquisition of centrifuge technology to enrich uranium—the technology that can provide material for nuclear weapons and that was the central concern in regard to Iran’s nuclear program. This flexibility is necessary, the administration argues, to ensure the Saudis choose Westinghouse as their nuclear power reactor supplier. But Westinghouse, which performed abysmally on its last two U.S. projects and is in bankruptcy as a result, is far less likely to win the bid than the South Korean construction firm whose work force is coming off successful completion of a large nuclear project nearby in the United Arab Emirates. This increases the importance of striking a tight U.S.-Saudi agreement to ensure the Saudis don’t get to enrich under their nuclear cooperative agreement with Seoul.

The administration’s pitch that Congress should go along with “flexibility” pulls out all the usual bogeymen. Energy Secretary Rick Perry told the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 22 that, “Either Russia or China is going to be a partner in building civil nuclear capability in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or the United States.”² The Saudis, guided by several Washington lobbying firms, have been pushing this line, which much of the Washington establishment has swallowed, adding that allowing Moscow to gain a nuclear foothold in Saudi Arabia would deal a serious blow to U.S. regional influence and prestige.

But the Saudis are not so foolish as to choose Russia or China. Moscow is nuclear supplier to Saudi Arabia’s foe, Iran, and Beijing has yet to bring a power reactor online outside of China. The Saudis already have a significant history of nuclear involvement with South Korea. They signed an agreement for “cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy” in 2011 and a memorandum of understanding in 2015, with a view to buying two smaller, so-called small modular (SMART) Korean reactors.³ Dozens of Saudis have gone to South Korea for nuclear training.⁴

1. This piece originally appeared as Victor Gilinsky and Henry Sokolski, “Facing reality in the US-Saudi nuclear agreement: South Korea,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 10, 2018, available from <https://thebulletin.org/facing-reality-us-saudi-nuclear-agreement-south-korea11683>.

2. Ari Natter, “U.S.’s Pass on Saudi Reactors Benefits China, Russia, Perry Says,” *Bloomberg*, March 22, 2018, available from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-03-22/u-s-pass-on-saudi-reactors-benefits-china-russia-perry-says>.

3. Andrew Roscoe, “Exclusive: Saudi Arabia Shortlists Two Sites for First Nuclear Power Project,” *Middle East Business Intelligence*, January 22, 2018, available from <https://www.meed.com/exclusive-saudi-arabia-shortlists-two-sites-first-nuclear-power-project/>.

4. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, “Kingdom makes significant progress in nuclear reactors: Envoy,” *Arab News*, March 17, 2017, available from <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1069531/saudi-arabia>.

In these circumstances, the enrichment provision in the 2011 Saudi-South Korean agreement is of vital concern.⁵ It reads as follows: “Uranium transferred pursuant to this Agreement or used in any equipment so transferred shall not be enriched to 20 percent or more in the isotope U-235 unless the Parties otherwise agree.” In other words, the 2011 agreement permits installation of Saudi enrichment facilities generally, and in particular the enrichment to 20 percent of uranium supplied under the agreement. A reason this is worrying—and was worrying in the case of Iran—is that, although it may seem counter intuitive, to further enrich the 20 percent product to a bomb explosive level takes only an additional one-tenth of the work it took to get to 20 percent. It becomes especially worrying when coupled with the Saudi Crown Prince’s hair-trigger promise (see this 60 Minutes interview)⁶ that if Iran got a bomb, the Kingdom would, too, “as soon as possible.”

This means that if we intend to bar Saudi Arabia’s path to nuclear weapons, and we absolutely should, we have to insist on a provision in our agreement with Saudi Arabia like that included in the agreement with its UAE neighbor: That the country will not engage in its territory in activities related to enrichment or reprocessing (extracting plutonium from spent nuclear fuel—the other path to a bomb). And we need to make sure South Korea agrees to hold off on moving forward on Saudi reactors until such a provision is in place.

Why would Saudi Arabia agree to such a restrictive provision? And why would South Korea agree to cooperate in ensuring it is in place. The short answer is that both countries depend on our protection. If we can pressure countries on trade terms—something the administrations brags about—surely, we can do so in the interest of security. As U.S. Sen. Jack Reed, ranking member of the Armed Services Committee, said in response to Perry’s testimony, “The proliferation dangers are so great that we should be able to wield all of the influence we have, which goes way beyond just this one transaction, to insist [on the] same standards we applied to the Emirates.” And as President Gerald Ford said many years ago, “nonproliferation objectives must take precedence over economic and energy benefits if a choice must be made.”

This of course assumes the administration adheres to the traditional U.S. policy objective of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, even among friends. An especially worrying aspect of this entire affair is that there seems to be a sense, born of hostility to Iran, that a Saudi nuclear weapon option might not be such a bad thing—in fact that it might even be useful to frighten Iran. All that can be said about such thinking is: This way lies chaos. We should move in the opposite direction, starting with barring Saudi Arabia from getting nuclear weapons.

5. “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for Cooperation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy,” available from http://npolicy.org/files/123_Agreement_ROK_Saudi.pdf.

6. “The Saudi Crown Prince Talks to 60 Minutes,” *CBS News*, March 18, 2018, available from https://www.cbs.com/shows/60_minutes/video/QBSli_U_PPAJyYuZgvJIEI44rZxYTE23/the-saudi-crown-prince-talks-to-60-minutes/.