

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE FORGOTTEN ALLY: U.S./SOUTH
KOREAN RELATIONS DURING THE
VIETNAM WAR

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South Korea participated in the Vietnam War as America's ally on a tremendous scale involving over 300,000 soldiers from 1964-1973. Despite this massive commitment, South Korea's involvement has attracted little scholarly interest or public attention. The prevailing explanation in relevant historiography often dismisses South Korea's role as a mercenary exchange taken under U.S. pressure or in pursuit of economic incentives. Alternatively, I argue that the South Korean government had a legitimate national interest in participating in the Vietnam War in pursuit of political, national defense, and economic advancements that were uniquely motivated by concurrent hostilities with North Korea. South Korea's national interests aligned with the U.S. such that they willingly and effectively contributed to the Vietnam War. By the war's end, U.S. and South Korean national interests diverged sharply as relations declined, which left South Korea's wartime role as an embattled and largely forgotten memory in the U.S.

THE FORGOTTEN ALLY:
U.S./SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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List of Abbreviations

ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

DMZ – Demilitarized Zone

DPRK – Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)

DRV – Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)

GVN – Government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

MAP – Military Assistance Program

MIC – Military Industrial Complex

OPCON – Operational Control

ROK – Republic of Korea (South Korea)

ROKA – Republic of Korea Army

ROKFV– Republic of Korea Forces Vietnam

ROKG – Republic of Korea Government

RVN – Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

SVN – South Vietnam

TACON – Tactical Control

UNCURK - United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea

USFK – United States Forces Korea

USG – United States Government

Introduction

On March 14, 1967, President Lyndon Johnson received an unusual request that was “vitaly important” to the war effort in Vietnam. South Korean President Park Chung Hee requested a special food, one that would cost Washington an estimated \$3-4 million dollars per year, to be added to the soldiers’ daily rations.¹ “I fully understand the desire of your men in the field to enjoy familiar rations,” said the President a week later; “That is the way it has been with soldiers throughout history.”² The President directed Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to fulfill the request, and almost a year later, President Johnson could report that “the bureaucracy in Washington gave him more hell” about this particular request than the entire Vietnam War in the first place. “The VC [Viet Cong] would never be able to hold” now that this food was set to arrive in the beginning of 1968.³ What was this specific ration that was so urgently needed on the battlefield? The fermented cabbage staple of Korea, kimchi, now appeared in the daily rations intended for the South Korean troops fighting alongside the U.S.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) participated in the Vietnam War with an enormous commitment over the war’s entire duration. The ROK deployed over 50,000 troops. From 1964-1973 over 300,000 South Koreans cycled through military service in Vietnam along

¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, March 14, 1967, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State. Foreign Relations of the United States, [hereafter FRUS] Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

² Letter from President Johnson to President Park, Washington, March 23, 1967. FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

³ Notes on Conversation Between President Johnson and President Pak. Canberra, December 21, 1967, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

with up to 100,000 civilian contractors conducting logistical support.⁴ Over 4,400 South Koreans died serving in Vietnam.⁵ The ROK's contribution to Vietnam was the single largest military commitment from an allied partner to a foreign U.S. war since World War II, exceeding any allied nation's contribution to the Iraq War or the total NATO contribution to the Afghanistan War.⁶

Despite the size and scope of the ROK commitment, Americans today have largely forgotten that South Korea ever had anything to do with the Vietnam War. Indeed, ROK participation has attracted little scholarly interest from American historians. In popular memory, no U.S. movie on Vietnam remotely acknowledges South Korea's presence, and U.S. high school textbooks certainly do not mention their role.⁷ How could a military partnership of this size and duration attract so little attention? Perhaps it is not surprising that American history has generally omitted the ROK's role in Vietnam from memory. The unpopularity and controversy surrounding Vietnam as America's first wartime defeat left little motivation to highlight foreign allies.

Yet, a deeper reason for the omission may lay in a misunderstanding of South Korea's uniquely complex motives for joining the war. The "mercenary narrative" in the

⁴ Kwak Tae Yang, "The Anvil of War: The Legacies of Korean Participation in the Vietnam War," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2006), iii.

⁵ Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 1994), 31, xiii.

⁶ The largest partner contribution to the Iraq War was the United Kingdom at 46,000 soldiers. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11107739>. Total NATO contributions to the Afghanistan War peaked at around 30,000 non-U.S. soldiers. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-afghanistan/>. This statement excludes a nation's military contribution to a war in its own territory (i.e. South Korea's military during the Korean War or South Vietnam's military during the Vietnam War).

⁷ See Chapter 4 and the bibliography for the list of films that support this assertion. For an example of an American History Textbook and a typical treatment of the Vietnam War, see *The Americans*, (Holt McDougal, 2006).

extant scholarship often quickly dismisses the ROK's contribution. Scholars and commentators, past and present, pejoratively characterized the ROK's participation as mercenaries rather than true allies, and moral ambiguity pervades this exchange. The U.S. Government (USG) paid the full cost of the ROK's military deployments, and the Republic of Korea's Government (ROKG) benefitted tremendously from their participation. The total payout to the ROK accounted for five billion dollars, up to 8% of the ROK's GDP during the period 1966-1969.⁸ Many scholars view the exchange as part of the asymmetrical relationship of an overbearing, imperial U.S. bending a client state to serve its purposes and propping up authoritarian rulers like South Korean President Park Chung Hee. Lastly, as the U.S. struggles with rationalizing its own participation in Vietnam, the idea of hiring foreign mercenaries to do the U.S.' bidding only adds to the tumultuous memory.

However, the mercenary narrative is an overly U.S.-centric interpretation, one that greatly oversimplifies events. A recent poll by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies found that 80% of South Koreans are aware of ROK participation in Vietnam, 57% believed it was the right choice, and only 27% believed the soldiers participated as mercenaries.⁹ The poll suggests a competing interpretation exists that is more nuanced than the U.S. simply purchasing soldiers for hire. The USG paid for the contributions from other nations too. So why exactly did the ROK provide such a disproportionately large commitment in the first place when other U.S. allies would not? Did the ROK have larger geo-political reasoning for fighting in Vietnam? How impactful were the ROK troops to

⁸ Glenn Baek, "A Perspective on Korea's Participation in the Vietnam War," *Asan Institute for Policy Studies* no. 53 (April 2013): 4.

⁹ Baek, 2-3.

the war effort? What were the after-effects on U.S./ROK relations? Lastly, why does it matter if the U.S. does or does not remember the ROK's role in Vietnam?

The U.S. presently, through either outright dismissal or perhaps due to the prevalence of the mercenary narrative, has misunderstood and underappreciated South Korea's role in the Vietnam War. The ROK did not participate in Vietnam simply as mercenaries in response to U.S. pressure. Instead, their primary motive was the pursuit of Park's national vision of "puguk kangbyong" (rich nation, strong army) and surpassing North Korea militarily and economically. In response to concurrent North Korean aggression, the ROKG had a legitimate national interest in supporting the U.S. war effort. USG and ROKG interests aligned such that the ROKG willingly contributed its military in what proved to be an effective and capable force above and beyond the political tokenism of symbolic, international support.

To support this assertion, this thesis utilizes a variety of sources. The first two chapters begin with a top-down approach where the primary actors under analysis are the governments of the two countries (referred to as USG and ROKG). Government, diplomatic, and military institutional sources reveal the USG and ROKG national interests, defined as the government's geo-political motivations for the Vietnam War. The USG's interests in acquiring ROK military personnel were aimed at alleviating acute manpower shortages and gaining international approval. The ROKG's national interests were rooted in gaining political stability and surpassing their rival, North Korea. The third chapter transitions from the top-down approach to a closer look at the ROK soldiers themselves. The ROK's effective military performance was linked to the ROKG's political aims. The thesis concludes with a comparative analysis of U.S. and South

Korean films to analyze public memory of the war. The film analysis shows that despite sharing an experience of war together, the question of national interests, “Why are we [U.S. and South Korea] in Vietnam?”, is uniquely missing from both country’s popular films, and is a possible explanation for why American popular memory does not include Koreans in their Vietnam War story.

Why does it matter if Americans remember South Korea’s role in Vietnam?

Restoring this memory as a part of American history is important in honoring the sacrifice of veterans for its own sake in addition to acknowledging the domestic impacts, both good and bad, the war brought to South Korea. South Korean veterans fought and died fighting for the same cause as American veterans, and their legacy should bear significance on the enduring U.S./ROK partnership. Secondly, the Vietnam War had dramatic and lasting effects for the ROK. The economic boost transformed South Korea from a poor nation dependent on U.S. aid into the rising world economic powerhouse that it is today. However, this transformation also paired with an authoritarian and militaristic government that stifled democracy, ignored human rights, and ran roughshod over domestic dissent. The USG may not have been fully cognizant of their role in enabling the massive transformation and upheaval that followed the ROK’s wartime participation. Lastly, the ROK’s participation serves as a case study in understanding the importance of a country’s national interest as a determinant in their level of effort towards an alliance. The ROK military was most effective in Vietnam when USG and ROKG interests were closely aligned, and as respective national interests diverged, so did their level of military effectiveness.

Both academically and in popular memory, South Korea's role in the Vietnam War has been left out of America's Vietnam War story. A reexamination of the alliance, putting South Korea back into the story, will benefit both countries in a wider reflection useful for appreciating their veterans and understanding the domestic impacts of the war in contemporary South Korea. ROKG's national interest led them to effectively contribute to the Vietnam War. Understanding a country's national interests, where and how they align, and how they change overtime, are vital considerations towards U.S. foreign affairs on the world stage. Before turning to my analysis, I will conclude the introduction with a brief overview of U.S./South Korean relations following World War II and a discussion of the relevant historiography of South Korean participation in the Vietnam War.

Historical Background

The Vietnam War was part of a long arc of shared history between the U.S. and South Korea that began in 1945. The end of World War II liberated Korea from Japanese colonial occupation, only to split Korea into two halves at the 38th parallel. A brief period of U.S. occupation in the South ended with the ROK's declaration of independence on August 15, 1948. A parallel Soviet occupation resulted in the declaration of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North. Reconciliation attempts failed, and the Korean War ravaged the peninsula from June 1950 until the armistice of July 1953. The war devastated the country, caused over two and a half million deaths, and wiped clean a blank slate for nation building on both sides, North and South.

Afterwards, from 1953-1960, the U.S. tepidly supported the ROK's first President, Syngman Rhee, for his anti-communist credentials and western ties. While making little progress towards economic development, Syngman Rhee was notoriously corrupt and used U.S. financial aid to prop up his unpopular government. In April 1960, a student led revolution succeeded in forcing Rhee's resignation. After Rhee, South Korea attempted a brief period of genuine democracy under Chang Myon, which lasted until the emergence of the Park Chung Hee coup.¹⁰

Park Chung Hee (1917-1979), more than any other single person, was central to South Korea's involvement in Vietnam. Park grew up poor in Kumi, a small peasant village near Taegu. He briefly worked as an elementary school teacher, but his true passion was to become a soldier. The militarization readily on display during the Japanese colonial period likely influenced Park. He found a mentor in school teacher Arikawa Shuichi, a successful Japanese military officer whom Park admired and sought to emulate.¹¹ Following his passion, Park became one of the few Koreans who attended the Manchurian Military Academy (at the time in Manchukuo, the Japanese colony) where he excelled with a perfectionism that impressed his superiors and peers, earning him the nick name "baka-majime" (crazy serious).¹² By all contemporary accounts from his peers, Park's experience at the Japanese academy was the most formative of his life, and the military discipline and lifestyle shaped his governance that influenced the ROK's

¹⁰ Park Tae Gyun, *An Ally and Empire: Two Myths of South-Korea United States Relations, 1945-1980* (Gyeonggi-do: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2012), 129-133, 203-205.

¹¹ Carter J. Eckert, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism 1866-1945* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 94-96.

¹² Eckert, 103.

path towards increasing militarization.¹³ Indeed, Park's military background was essential in understanding his inclination towards committing the ROKG to the Vietnam War. Following a successful career serving in the Japanese military in World War II and the ROK Army (ROKA) in the Korean War, Park rose to the rank of Major General. In 1961, Park led the coup that ousted the brief democratic government of Chang Myon.

Park seized power in a military coup against the short-lived democracy of Chang Myon in May 1961. Chang went into hiding, and the South Korean President, Yun Po-Son supported the coup. The USG, who certainly had prior knowledge of the coup, took no action to stop it. The USG adopted a "wait and see approach."¹⁴ Park utilized 3,500 soldiers to carry out a completely bloodless coup. Park's entrance to the political scene was a major turning point in U.S./ROK relations.

Park led South Korea from 1961-1979 and did more to develop the economy than any other executive. During his tenure, South Korea's economy tripled, overtook that of North Korea, and was no longer dependent on U.S. financial aid by 1979.¹⁵ All the while, he was an authoritarian, military dictator who oppressed political opposition and stifled democracy. In hindsight, the cost-benefit analysis of the Park government and its methods left a much debated and controversial record for historians.

The first two years of Park's government were brutally repressive. Under the direction of the Supreme Council of National Reconstruction (SCNR) Park suspended the 1960 Constitution and began a war on all political dissent. He arrested 2,000 politicians

¹³ Eckert, 4.

¹⁴ Park, 195.

¹⁵ Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 88.

(including former Prime Minister Chang Myon), purged 13,300 civil servants, closed 49 out of the 64 newspapers, arrested 14,000 citizens, and created a “political purification law” that banned over 4,000 politicians.¹⁶ Repression grew worse after the declaration of the Yushin (revitalizing reform) constitution in 1972, when Park declared himself de-facto president for life, unleashed the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) to terrorize the population, and enacted martial law. However, prior to the Yushin order, Park, under U.S. pressure, ostensibly ran and presented himself as democratically elected President from 1963-1971. This is the primary period under analysis, in which South Korea participated in the U.S. war effort in Vietnam.

Paralleling involvement with postcolonial Korea, the U.S. also became increasingly involved in supporting a democratic government in South Vietnam during the Cold War. Following World War II, Vietnamese nationalists engaged in a postcolonial struggle against the French which culminated in the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and caused the division of Vietnam into two countries. The U.S. quickly became entangled in support of an unstable South Vietnam in a losing struggle against the hostile North and domestic insurgency in the South. Following the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the U.S. committed conventional military forces, escalating the conflict into the Vietnam War of 1965-1973. The U.S. hoped to bring its allies along for the ride to gain international support for the war against communism.

President Lyndon Johnson and his administration created the “Free World Assistance Program,” or colloquially called the “More Flags” program in the spring of

¹⁶ Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 355.

1964. “More Flags” sought to legitimize the U.S. effort in the Vietnam War by gaining the approval of the international “Free World” community as a global struggle against communism. By December 1964, Washington asked thirty-four countries to participate, of which only fifteen responded positively. The international community was highly resistant to intervention in Vietnam. France, under Charles de Gaulle was particularly outspoken and advocated for a neutralization settlement.¹⁷ The United Nations and majority of the international community agreed with de Gaulle. Of the fifteen countries who did respond, six offered to send military personnel (South Korea, The Philippines, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan).¹⁸ Washington refused Taiwan’s offer for fear of enraging the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and bringing them into the conflict.

South Korea eagerly offered to send combat troops. The ROK commitment far and away exceeded all other contributing nations combined by 228% (the next closest was Thailand with 11,586 – see Appendix A). From 1964 to 1967, South Korea sent five deployments that began with non-combat support and escalated into two combat divisions (see Appendix B). Furthermore, the ROK commitment lasted the entirety of the war. By 1972, there were more ROK soldiers in Vietnam than U.S. (37,438 ROK to 29,655 U.S).¹⁹ ROK troops finally withdrew after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. What factors explain this seemingly oversized commitment from the ROK compared to the other allies? How have historians explained these events?

¹⁷ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), Chapter 1, Kindle Edition, Location 283-290.

¹⁸ Blackburn, 22.

¹⁹ Eckhardt Fuchs, Tokushi Kasahara, and Sven Saaler eds., *A New Modern History of East Asia Vol. 1* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2018), 334.

Historiography

There are two historiographical debates regarding U.S./ROK relations during the Vietnam War. The first theme is the mercenary narrative which argues that because the U.S. paid for South Korea's deployments, observers should conclude the ROKG was motivated solely by economic incentives. Scholars often use the word "mercenary" in a broader sense of a loaded term meant to imply criticism of the soldiers' motivations and presence. The second theme considers the consequences the Vietnam War brought to the ROK domestically and weighs the extent to which the U.S. bears culpability versus Korean agency in causing these effects; essentially, scholars ask "who used who?" In other words, to what extent did the U.S. exert pressure to force Korea's participation, versus to what extent did Korean leaders, namely Park Chung Hee, seek out Vietnam as an opportunity? Each theme will be analyzed in turn, beginning with the mercenary narrative.

The mercenary narrative reveals a subjectivity that often splits between the scholarship of U.S. and South Korean perspectives. Most U.S. scholars favor the mercenary narrative in which South Korea, eager to reap the financial benefits, responded to U.S. economic incentives and pressure. In contrast, South Korean scholars tend to offer more equivocal causality in which ROKG had a legitimate national interest in Vietnam and sought political leverage and national security, with economic benefits as secondary.

Beginning with U.S. scholars, Robert M. Blackburn was the first historian to devote a monograph addressing the U.S.' use of allies in the Vietnam War. Blackburn decries the "More Flags" initiative as a failure that did not achieve its goal of attaining

international approval for the war, nor did it obtain beyond a token commitment from most U.S. allies.²⁰ Concerning the five allies that sent troops, Blackburn assigns only Australia and New Zealand as legitimate efforts motivated by anti-communism, solely because these two countries paid for their own contributions.²¹ Subsequent U.S. historians concurred with Blackburn. Fredrik Logevall calls “more flags” the “few flags problem” that “accomplished next to nothing.”²² Logevall declared the non-paying contributor nations were not “true allies.”²³ This is a common U.S. interpretation, one that is quick to dismiss ROK troops as an unfaithful exchange.²⁴ The narrative still persists today. A self-published study in 2020 by Charles Hernández, a student from Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, repeats the same argument.²⁵ He states that of all the nations that sent troops, “Vietnam had no direct relevance to South Korea’s national interest.”²⁶ Although his is a self-published work, opposed to a product of an academic press, the monograph shows the likely interpretation that a general American audience would encounter.²⁷ This thesis will challenge the mercenary narrative and will bridge this U.S. perspective with that of South Korean scholars.

²⁰ Blackburn, 1-9.

²¹ Blackburn, 117-118.

²² Logevall, Chapter 6, Kindle Edition, Location 3005.

²³ Logevall, Chapter 12, Kindle Edition. Location 5978-5984. Oddly, he does not credit New Zealand as a true supporter, while Blackburn does.

²⁴ For another example from a prominent U.S. scholar, see Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 158.

²⁵ Charles Hernández, *Mercenaries in the Vietnam War: Washington’s Hiring of South Korean Soldiers* (self-pub., 2020), 55.

²⁶ Hernández, 48.

²⁷ The book is available for free via Amazon Prime and appears when searching for “South Korean Soldiers in the Vietnam War.” [Amazon.com : South Korean Soldiers in the Vietnam War](#) (accessed January 14,

South Korean scholars tend to offer a wider and complex analysis of events. Byung-Kook Kim explains that Park's overriding vision for South Korea was "puguk kangbyong" (rich nation, strong army) and that anticommunism was South Korea's "kuksi" (national essence). Park, the military dictator of South Korea from 1961-1979, prioritized both economic and military improvements as Korea's path forward. Dispatching troops to Vietnam was a move towards gaining U.S. favor, political leverage, and legitimacy. Furthermore, Park sought to "construct a regional security network" in which South Korea would become further linked to the U.S. on the front lines of the Cold War.²⁸ Min Yong Lee expounds upon this South Korean interpretation. Lee asserts that Park sought to prevent U.S. troop reductions in South Korea, acquire military force modernization, provide South Korean soldiers with combat experience, and become "an indispensable strategic ally of the United States."²⁹ Lee believes that economic motivations were strictly secondary in nature. South Korea easily could have sent a token commitment of only non-combat support like other U.S. allies. Instead, South Korea sent their premier combat divisions, the Capital and 9th Divisions, showing their commitment to the alliance was serious. South Korea voluntarily offered to send troops, even prior to formal U.S. requests.³⁰

2021). This is relevant to show the available information that would likely appear to a general audience interested in the topic.

²⁸ Byung Kook-Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, eds., *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), Introduction, Kindle Edition, Location 219.

²⁹ Min Yong Lee, "The Vietnam War: South Korea's Search for National Security," in Byung Kook-Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, eds., *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, Chapter 14, Kindle Edition, Location 5668.

³⁰ Min Yong Lee, Kindle Edition, Location 5654-5828.

Not all South Korean scholars are unanimous in this judgement, however. Adding to the complexity, historian Park Tae Gyun focuses less on contesting the mercenary narrative and more on an internal conflict in South Korean memory concerning economic opportunism. Park argues that the ROK's involvement in Vietnam is largely misunderstood today by most South Koreans as a "business opportunity" that was necessary for South Korea's economic takeoff. Park asserts that the Park Chung Hee regime deliberately used ROK troops in Vietnam as a bargaining chip, acknowledging that the international community perceived them as "de facto mercenaries" to gain political leverage over the U.S.³¹ Park believes South Korea's participation was a mistaken policy because it ultimately led to worse relations with the USG by the 1970s.³²

Park Tae Gyun's observation that the war was seen as a "business opportunity" leads into the second major theme which considers how the war impacted the ROK domestically. There is no doubt that the ROK benefited economically from participating in Vietnam, but it came at the cost of increasing authoritarianism. Park Chung Hee gained immense political leverage, both over the U.S. and domestic opposition which further stifled South Korea's growth towards a true democracy and culminated with Park's despotic Yushin constitution in the 1970's.

Scholars who analyze the war's domestic impacts on the ROK often debate the degree of Korean agency at play compared to that of U.S. pressure. Was ROK participation in Vietnam best characterized as the U.S. forcing them into the conflict with a carrot and a stick, or did the ROK seize an opportunity to ascend to a stronger position

³¹ Park, 255.

³² Park, 301.

internationally? Many historians, such as Bruce Cumings, Katharine Moon, and Jim Glassman write critically of the U.S. support for Park, claiming that the U.S. bore culpability in delaying democracy from emerging in South Korea until the 1990's.³³ For a contrasting view, both Park Tae Gyun and Gregg Brazinsky stress the “negotiation” between the U.S. and ROK as the key to South Korea’s evolution.³⁴ Furthermore, other South Korean scholars tend to emphasize that South Korean agency always played the pivotal role. Byun-Kook Kim boldly states that the U.S.’s role was “far from that of a hegemon” and often an “object of manipulation.”³⁵ Taehyun Kim and Chang Jae Baik similarly state “the client more often outmaneuvered the patron.”³⁶

In summary, the historiographical conversation concerning ROK participation in Vietnam centers on two linked debates. Should the ROK military be considered U.S. mercenaries? Were the effects of the Vietnam War beneficial or harmful to the ROK in the long run, and should they be attributed to U.S. pressure or ROK agency?

³³ Bruce Cumings, the most well-known U.S. historian on 20th century Korea, lived in the ROK during the 60's and 70's and was outspoken against Park Chung Hee at the time. Cumings observes the ROK's involvement in Vietnam accelerated Park's economic initiatives but also enabled blatant human rights abuses and repressive policies (*Korea's Place in the Sun*, 321, 372). Similarly, Katharine Moon commented that the ROK military in its entirety was a “mercenary force” for the U.S. to repress South Korean political opposition [Katharine H. S. Moon, *Protesting America: Democracy and the U.S.-Korea Alliance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 202-203]. Jim Glassman asserts that the U.S. military industrial complex, specifically through the Korean and Vietnam Wars, created a “Pacific Ruling Class”. Thus, the “east Asian miracles” were inextricably tied to the “east Asian massacres” of Cold War conflict [Jim Glassman, *Drums of War, Drums of Development* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 3, 17, 376].

³⁴Concerning Vietnam, Brazinsky suggests, “[South Korea’s] motives for assisting the United States apparently were a combination of economic opportunism and a strong belief in personal sacrifice for the greater good of the nation.” [Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 11]. Park Tae Gyun also stresses the concept of negotiation between the two powers (Park, 5-7).

³⁵ Byung-Kook Kim, *The Park Chung Hee Era*, Introduction, Kindle Edition, Location 252.

³⁶ Taehyun Kim and Chang Jae Baik, “Taming and Tamed by the United States,” in *The Park Chung Hee Era*, Chapter 2, Kindle Edition, Location 794.

This thesis will add to the conversation of U.S./ROK relations during the Vietnam War in four chapters. Chapter 1 explains why the ROKG entered Vietnam for political, national defense, and economic motivations, and retraces the origins of the mercenary narrative. Next, Chapter 2 argues for South Korea's legitimate national interest in the Vietnam War as intricately linked to conflict with North Korea. Chapter 3 evaluates the ROK's military performance in Vietnam and argues the ROK military does not fit the mercenary label and reflected the degree of ROKG's national interest. Lastly, Chapter 4 concludes with the negative aftermath of the war when USG and ROKG national interests diverged. The war's aftermath led to a sharp decline in U.S./ROK relations and a conflicted popular memory in the long term.

Chapter 1: “Aladdin’s Lamp” - Why the ROK Joined the Vietnam War

“There has been growing feeling in ROKG and Korean public that ROK troop dispatch to Vietnam has strengthened “special relationship” between US and ROK which justifies having their desires, whether in political, economic or defense area, being given special and unique consideration by USG...In short, they see the 50,000 ROK troops in Vietnam as their “Aladdin's Lamp” to make all their dreams come true.”³⁷

-William Porter, U.S. Ambassador to the ROK, November 25, 1967

William Porter called the deployment of ROK troops in Vietnam an “Aladdin’s lamp,” through which the ROKG boldly sought maximum concessions from the USG. Porter’s comment identified the ROKG’s pursuit of national interests, that Vietnam enabled them to fulfill their goals (“make all their dreams come true”). ROK national interests comprised three goals: political stability, national defense, and economic development. The pursuit of these goals explained the ROKG’s decision to enter the Vietnam War. Park required USG buy-in to survive domestic opposition following his 1961 coup and the ongoing struggle to normalize relations with Japan. Once stabilized politically, subsequent troop negotiations focused on gaining concessions towards national defense and economic development aimed at surpassing their rival, North Korea. In conducting this exchange, USG and ROKG officials were highly sensitive that international opinion would view this trade as a “mercenary” transaction of blood for treasure. Despite steps from both administrations to control public appearance and minimize controversy, the mercenary narrative took hold and proved to have a lasting

³⁷ Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, November 25, 1967. FRUS Korea, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

presence. Chapter 1 will first analyze how the ROK's Vietnam deployments achieved political, defense, and economic national interests. Secondly, it will analyze how and why domestic opposition in both the U.S. and ROK predominately viewed these events as a "mercenary" exchange.

Three Wishes: Political, Defense, Economical

ROK's first and foremost reason for entering the Vietnam War was the pursuit of political stability. The early Park government from 1961-1963 began on the wrong foot. After successfully installing himself as the ROK's executive, Park faced strong domestic opposition combined with U.S. hesitancy. Adopting a "wait and see" approach during the coup, the USG only tacitly approved of him. In the early 60's, USG was reevaluating aid policies towards Korea out of frustration over the ROK's lack of economic progress. The USG invested more time and money into the ROK as a developmental project of the Cold War than anywhere else in the world (about \$200 million annually, by comparison all of Western Europe combined received \$259 million in 1959), and yet the ROK was still heavily dependent on U.S. aid during Park's coup.³⁸ Park's obstinacy towards following U.S. economic advice and reluctance to hold a democratic election drove the USG to increase pressure.³⁹ Additionally, the USG planned troop withdrawals off the peninsula as Vietnam began to displace Korea as the military priority. Troop withdrawals combined with the ongoing debate over ROK/Japan

³⁸ David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 147.

³⁹ Brazinsky, 129-131. The USG reduced aid to Korea from \$177.5 million in 1961 to \$92.5 million in 1962.

normalization to signal to the South Korean people that the U.S. was abandoning them. Potential U.S. withdrawal worried ROKG, which was still largely dependent on U.S. financial aid and military defense against North Korea, who in the 60's was economically and militarily ahead of South Korea.

Normalizing ROK/Japanese relations became the largest politically destabilizing issue in Park's early years. The USG believed Japan could take over a share of the burden in propping up South Korea's economy.⁴⁰ However, many South Koreans vehemently protested any degree of reconciliation with Japan. Protests in Seoul occurred with over 20,000 students taking to the streets to protest. The U.S. was concerned there may be a repeat of the April 1960 student-led protests that ousted Syngman Rhee. U.S. Ambassador Samuel Berger lamented that the "situation in Korea has again reached a peak of uncertainty, unrest and disarray," and was "most grave and fraught with difficulty since the May 16, 1961 coup."⁴¹ The U.S. even began planning for contingency operations in the event of another coup (again recommending the "wait and see" approach provided the coup was non-communist).⁴² Under the duress of domestic opposition, Park could not be certain of much needed U.S. cooperation. The USG easily could have abandoned Park under the circumstances. In response to the unrest, Park

⁴⁰ Brazinsky, 140. After achieving normalization in 1965, Japan gave the ROK \$30 million in grants, \$20 million in loans, and within two years became the ROK's largest trading partner.

⁴¹ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, May 20, 1964, FRUS Korea, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁴² Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara, Washington, September 21, 1964, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

declared martial law and turned to the U.S. for a path forward by promising ROK/Japan normalization and joining the Vietnam War.⁴³

Park first offered to dispatch combat troops to Vietnam to seek U.S. approval and legitimization. In 1964, the U.S. “more flags” program explicitly requested only non-combat support. By this time, the ROK had already committed its non-combat package (a MASH, Taekwondo instructors, and the ‘Dove’ Unit). Stressing that combat troops would not be necessary, Ambassador Winthrop Brown told Park, “This was not that kind of war.” In the same conversation, Park hinted he was willing to send two combat divisions in addition to mobilizing large numbers of recently discharged veterans, whom Park claimed were willing to fight in Vietnam if they could be equipped and transported.⁴⁴ The offer came at a turning point in the U.S. escalation of the Vietnam War, and President Johnson was eager to maximize international involvement. Park’s offer caught the interest of U.S. State officials and would become a key issue in sealing USG support for Park through his 1965 state visit.

In a moment that signaled the alignment of USG and ROKG national interests, Park achieved his goal of political legitimacy by the time of his U.S. state visit in May 1965. Brown wrote to Secretary Bill Bundy that Park was seeking the “U.S. blessing to ease his task of gaining public acceptance” and that the visit was a chance to “get the ROKG moving again.”⁴⁵ Expecting progress on the Japan settlement and troops for

⁴³ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, July 6, 1964, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁴⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Seoul, December 19, 1964, FRUS Korea, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁴⁵ Letter From the Ambassador to Korea (Brown) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Bundy) Seoul, September 21, 1964, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

Vietnam, the USG made it loud and clear that they fully supported Park and that Vietnam was a shared interest. Starting on May 17, 1965, the USG treated Park like royalty over a ten-day state visit. The formalities included a parade in New York City, luncheons, banquets, and a farewell party attended by President Johnson.⁴⁶ Park received full military honors in a reception at the White House South Lawn, in which Johnson delivered a warm speech that stressed their common interests. Vietnam conspicuously surfaced in Johnson's speech: "We welcome this strength that your land offers now to the defense of freedom not only in Korea but in Viet-Nam as well, Mr. President." Park responded by confirming Vietnam as a shared interest: "Along the truce line in Korea, in the jungles of Viet-Nam, your beloved sons and husbands now share the same encampment and trenches with our own men to defend freedom from Communist aggression."⁴⁷ Park's final toast at the end of the visit signaled that Korea would "stave off the Red influx in Southeast Asia, arm in arm with the United States...Korea will continue to be a faithful comrade...for many years to come...We are very proud to do so...".⁴⁸ USG and ROKG interests aligned; Park gained legitimization as the ROK's executive and the USG gained manpower for Vietnam.

Upon his return, Park followed through on his commitment to resolving the Japan settlement and dispatching combat troops to Vietnam. Within a month, the ROK and Japan drafted the "Treaty on Basic Relations" on June 22, 1965. Park arranged the ROK assembly to vote on the treaty and the Vietnam deployments in the same legislative

⁴⁶ Park, 266.

⁴⁷ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States [hereafter P.P.], Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965 Book 1, 254 - Remarks of Welcome at the White House to the President of Korea. May 17, 1965, 538-539.

⁴⁸ P.P. Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965 Book 1, 256 – Toasts of the President and President Chung Hee Park of Korea, May 17, 1965, 550.

session on August 13, 1965.⁴⁹ Both decisions met widespread resistance domestically, as reconciling with Japan and sending troops to a foreign war did not appeal to most South Koreans.⁵⁰ Opposition leader Yun Po-sun and 23 other members boycotted the vote. One opposition party member prophetically doubted that the U.S. truly intended to “persevere in Vietnamese war” and that South Korea should not “become involved in situation which appears hopeless.”⁵¹ Despite the opposition, and reflective of Park’s political stranglehold over ROKG, the assembly approved the Vietnam decision with 101 in favor, 1 against, and 2 abstentions.⁵² Concluding the Japan and Vietnam decisions went a long way in legitimizing Park in the eyes of USG, and correspondingly gave him exponentially more political clout and influence in ROKG.

Regarding the first combat deployment, political stability was the ROKG’s foremost motivation; USG concessions were relatively few compared to future negotiations. Regarding all subsequent deployments, the ROKG would make full use of their newfound leverage to gain concessions on national security and economic development, directly in line with Park’s vision of “puguk kangbyong” (rich nation, strong army). Within less than year, the USG continued to ask for more troops in a pattern that would continue until 1968. The ROKG now had a valuable bargaining chip, something that the USG desperately wanted as the Vietnam War intensified. ROKG used

⁴⁹ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, June 3, 1965. FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1. According to the U.S. embassy, Park purposely combined the two issues so that the “opposition would have problem where to concentrate its fire.”

⁵⁰ Brazinsky, 137.

⁵¹ Document 32 - Editorial Note, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁵² Ibid.

this bargaining chip with an eye towards North Korea by seeking concessions towards national defense.

The ROKG's second most motivation regarding Vietnam deployments was the pursuit of national defense. Their chief rival, North Korea, was ahead both economically and militarily by a wide margin in the 60's and remained an existential threat. North Korean military provocations across the DMZ increased by the hundreds, (peaking in major incidents in 1968 – discussed in Chapter 2). ROKG used their newfound leverage over the U.S. to bolster their own military capability and prevent U.S. withdrawal from the region. In the late 50's, the USG was reconsidering its foreign aid priorities in the world and looked at South Korea as a sunk cost, as the country that received by far the most aid appeared to be achieving little progress.⁵³ After Park's Vietnam decision, the USG swiftly reversed course on key national defense spending decisions for the ROK.

The ROK's Vietnam deployments directly prevented the U.S. planned Military Assistance Program (MAP) transfer. The ROK's portion of MAP accounted for \$200 million, which the U.S. intended to cut it down to \$153 million in 1964 and cut another \$20 million by 1965.⁵⁴ The Vietnam decision reversed this completely. By 1967, President Johnson ordered that there would be absolutely no cuts to the ROK's MAP portion, even as the total U.S. MAP global budget reduced from \$620 million to \$400 million (all these cuts would occur elsewhere).⁵⁵ In 1964, U.S. aid accounted for two

⁵³ Eckbladh, 150.

⁵⁴ Memorandum From the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Barnett) to the Chief of the Military Assistance Division of the Agency for International Development (Black), Washington, October 5, 1964, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁵⁵ Notes on Conversation Between President Johnson and President Pak, Canberra, December 21, 1967. FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

thirds of the ROK defense budget, such that any cuts to the MAP would have severe impacts on ROK military spending.⁵⁶ By keeping their share of the MAP, ROKG maintained their current level of spending.

Additionally, ROKG's Vietnam decision directly delayed planned U.S. troop withdrawals in United States Forces Korea (USFK). By 1964, the U.S. intended to reassign 12,000 U.S. soldiers out of Korea and reduce funding for ROK forces by 70,000 (out of 580,000) phased over two years.⁵⁷ Brown advised the State Department to reconsider, stating: "...the prospect of further Korean troops for RVN would be highly adverse for obvious reasons."⁵⁸ Following Brown's advice, the USG delayed the troop reductions.⁵⁹ President Johnson personally promised Park that no U.S. troops would withdraw from the ROK without Park's prior knowledge. Success on these two issues, MAP transfer and troop reductions, were two major national-defense concessions that encouraged ROKG to press their newfound leverage even further.

The single largest series of defense and economic concessions came with the ROK's second combat deployment in 1966. Pushing the envelope, ROKG handed the U.S. embassy a wish list of ten items which Brown called "extremely unreasonable."⁶⁰ The list covered a wide gambit of military and economic projects. Items ranged from

⁵⁶ Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara Washington, August 11, 1964. FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁵⁷ Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Johnson Washington, January 22, 1964. FRUS Korea, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁵⁸ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, June 4, 1965, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1

⁵⁹ The U.S. delayed the withdrawal of the 7th ID until 1970, under the changed circumstances by President Nixon and the 'Nixon Doctrine' – see Part 4.

⁶⁰ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, January 10, 1966 FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

covering $\frac{3}{4}$ of the entire ROK military budget until 1971 to items as diverse as a fund for cultural projects. Upon receiving the list, both the State and Defense Department rejected the proposal. Samuel Berger stated the list “caused some disappointment here... We have thought that the mendicant period of Korean history was drawing to a close...,” a reference to the previous decade of U.S. aid’s lack of results in Korea. McNamara reported to President Johnson that the Koreans were asking for “about \$600-700 million worth of cumshaw” which far exceeded U.S. predictions.⁶¹ Ultimately, in only a matter of weeks, the USG was so desperate for the manpower in Vietnam that they caved in on ROKG requests.⁶²

The final list of U.S. concessions became known to the South Korean public in the “Brown Memorandum” on March 8, 1966 (see Appendix C).⁶³ The list was a treasure trove of military and economic bonuses which ROKG hoped would convince the South Korean public of the justification in deploying a second combat division. Secretary of State Dean Rusk called this list “not only fair, but generous, and should provide the basis for an effective presentation to the Korean people.”⁶⁴ This was a shocking reversal from U.S. officials’ surprised reaction just weeks earlier. Such a change in attitudes reflected the USG’s increasing desperation in Vietnam and the need for immediate influx of personnel. By 1967, the U.S. had already committed 20% of the U.S. Army to Vietnam

⁶¹ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, January 10, 1966 FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁶² Park, 277.

⁶³ Park, 387.

⁶⁴ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, January 27, 1966, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

and was eager for increased ROK commitments.⁶⁵ Dean Rusk expressed as much: “I need not stress that the matter is urgent and the stakes very high, for Korea as well as the Free World.”⁶⁶

Suspending the MAP transfer, delaying USFK troop reductions, and a generous package of military modernization items, benefits, and bonuses were all extravagant concessions towards improving the ROK’s national defense. U.S. concessions were not limited to a military nature. On the civilian side, the ROKG pursued aggressive economic opportunities through war-time production, contracting, and procurement.

The ROKG’s third motivation for Vietnam participation was economic development. In exchange for their commitments, ROKG expected heavy favoritism in war-time civilian contracting. In 1965, Defense Minister Sung Eun Kim said that he “is not seeking any bargains” in sending additional ROK troops. Yet, in the same conversation, Kim made a comparison to Japan’s role during the Korean War. Kim’s analogy stated that the Japanese got rich from the Korean War “while the Koreans did the fighting” and now the same thing must happen for Koreans in South Vietnam. Kim claimed the ROK required a “special advantage” in gaining business contracts for the war.⁶⁷ Brown relayed this message to the State Department, reporting that “it will be utterly impossible for them [ROKG] to understand why there can be no preferred

⁶⁵ Park, 278.

⁶⁶ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, January 27, 1966, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁶⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, May 18, 1965. FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

treatment,” regarding Vietnam contracts.⁶⁸ The USG, desperate for the manpower, was inclined to give it to them.

The ROKG acquired an economic golden opportunity through their Vietnam participation. The USG gave ROKG the contracts to rural reconstruction and pacification in Vietnam, as well as contracts for construction projects throughout Southeast Asia. Beyond paying for the deployments themselves, estimates for the total U.S. payout to the ROK from 1965-1970 ranged as high as \$5 billion. Between 1965 and 1968, the ROK gained \$402 million from business contracts related to the Vietnam War.⁶⁹ South Korean revenues from the war made up 40% of their foreign earnings for the period.⁷⁰ South Korea received preferential treatment for all OSP contracts and did not have to compete with non-U.S. bidders.⁷¹ 94% of South Korean steel exports and 52% of transportation equipment exports went to Vietnam. From 1965-1968, South Korea’s economy grew by 10% per year, domestic revenues doubled, and exports grew tenfold from 1961-1968.⁷²

Undeniably, ROKG reaped enormous benefits from participating in Vietnam. John Lie calls the Vietnam War one of the “external and contingent factors,” that combined with the normalization of relations with Japan to enable South Korea to achieve modernization despite Park’s otherwise failing policies.⁷³ Park’s controversial

⁶⁸ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, December 28, 1965, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁶⁹ Brazinsky, 139-140.

⁷⁰ Baek, 4.

⁷¹ Glassman, 328.

⁷² P.P. Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968, Book 1, 63 – Special Message to the Congress on the Foreign Assistance Programs: “To Build the Peace.” February 8, 1968, 206.

⁷³ John Lie, *Han Unbound: The Political Economy of South Korea* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), 44, 64-69.

decisions were unpopular domestically, yet they incorporated the ROK economy firmly into the U.S. and Japanese economic sphere in 1965. The exchange of Vietnam deployments for political, defense, and economic concessions, comprised the chief motives of the ROKG. USG and ROKG interests became aligned. The exchange also came with a very powerful appearance of the ROKG selling its soldiers to the U.S. as mercenaries, forming a powerful narrative that surfaced at the time and persists in present-day.

Origin of the Mercenary Narrative

Both the USG and ROKG were keenly aware of the appearance of the ROK military in Vietnam as mercenaries. The mercenary label brought heightened anxiety to both governments because it undermined the stated foreign policy goals of the USG and the autonomy of the ROKG. USG Cold War foreign interventions operated on a rhetoric of promoting liberal democracies in the world to improve a country's political stability, civic freedoms, and quality of life. South Korea had long been the U.S.'s largest developmental project to prove the merits of liberal democracy over those of a communist alternative in the Cold War.⁷⁴ If international opinion now saw South Korea allegedly selling out their military to the U.S. or in some way bowing to U.S. pressure, this rhetoric would lose validity. Likewise, the appearance gave communist adversaries a

⁷⁴ Ekbladh, 114-115.

propaganda angle to characterize South Korea as a “puppet army” of the U.S., a theme Kim Il Sung and North Korea had already been using since the Korean War.⁷⁵

Winthrop Brown, the U.S. Ambassador to the ROK from 1964 to 1967, presciently foreshadowed that the mercenary label was likely to become the international interpretation of events. Originally against accepting ROK combat troops in 1965, Brown advised the State Department the “time is not now propitious” for a combat deployment. Brown cautioned, “Hue and cry will bewilder [ROK] general public” for sending their young men to a foreign war when poverty at home and North Korea next door appeared more urgent matters.⁷⁶ The consequences could potentially have backfired by strengthening the ROK domestic political opposition and creating political instability. Brown further warned: “It is the risk of creating a situation in which Korea appears to its own people and to others in the world not as an independent and willing contributor to a struggle in which it has a vital interest, but as a puppet or vassal of the US, brought into danger in distant Southeast Asia and at home to serve the interests of the US.”⁷⁷ Brown astutely captured the essence of the mercenary narrative and brought into question the nature of the ROKG’s “interests.”

However, the mercenary narrative was not a complete explanation of the ROKG’s interests. Brown, perhaps through virtue of physically being in Korea and closest to those involved in the negotiations, had a unique view of events that was both cautious and

⁷⁵ “Record of Conversation between Premier Kim and the Chinese Friendship Delegation,” August 20, 1965, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 106-01479-05, 46-51. Translated by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118795>.

⁷⁶ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, April 15, 1965, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

sympathetic. While he did warn the State department of the consequences of the mercenary appearance, Brown himself did not critically question Korean motivations as unethical or purely monetary focused. In fact, he acknowledged Korean veterans took great pride in their anti-Communist stance and would be eager to help a “country threatened by a common enemy.”⁷⁸ In a later statement reflecting on Korea’s stake in the conflict, Brown appeared to change his mind with a more encouraging view:

It is fair to say to Korea that this battle is hers as well as ours, that she can afford the men, that it is her duty to return in some measure the help rendered her so unstintingly by the free world in the past, and that we will ensure that this will not involve her in extra cost. But it is also a cold fact that Korea does not have to do this, that it does involve Korea in some additional risk, that a well-trained combat division can be a real contribution to the struggle, and that it can save us a great deal in blood and treasure.⁷⁹

Here again Brown spoke of the question of national interests. He believed the ROK had a stake in the conflict (“hers as well as ours”), that the ROK’s decision was voluntary (“does not have to do this”) and could have a real impact on the Vietnam War (“save us a great deal in blood and treasure”).

As Brown advised, both the USG and ROKG took active steps towards controlling the mercenary appearance. Both governments agreed that they should “do everything possible” to prevent the public from knowing that the U.S. was directly paying the ROK combat forces.⁸⁰ Secretary of State Dean Rusk emphasized the limited nature of the first ROK deployment in a response to Brown: “we are most anxious to have this appear—as indeed is the fact—as a limited measure to secure particular areas

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, July 10, 1965. FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁸⁰ Document 32 - Editorial Note, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

and conduct limited operations from them [ROK troops].” Rusk stressed that the U.S. not “jump the gun...to avoid most serious consequences in GVN [South Vietnam] and in world attitudes.”⁸¹ Despite these efforts, the exchange proved impossible to hide, and the mercenary appearance quickly surfaced as Brown feared.

Several embarrassments revealed both government’s vain attempts at influencing public perception. ROK Minister of Defense Sung Eun Kim let slip that the U.S. agreed to take over payments for the currently existing ROK forces in Vietnam (the Dove unit), something USG wanted kept secret. In response, the U.S. embassy now explicitly wrote of concern for critics “charges that ROK forces are being used as mercenaries.”⁸²

Another embarrassing incident came when South Vietnam sent an appreciative letter to the ROKG to congratulate them on their decision to send more troops. Unfortunately, the letter preceded the ROKG’s legislative approval of the deployment, making it appear that Park had already committed the troops without the approval of his legislature. Park urged the letter “be kept completely secret in view [of] obvious embarrassment to his government should its contents become known.”⁸³

The announcement of the second combat division (1966) was even more secretive than the first. President Johnson demanded that the finalized decision not be announced, so instead USG maintained the appearance of ongoing negotiations. To better sell the decision to the Korean public, ROKG requested the announcement be made only in a

⁸¹ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, April 26, 1965. FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁸² Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, June 23, 1965. FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁸³ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, June 14, 1965, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

joint statement that emphasized U.S. voluntary concessions. Brown reported that the ROKG desired a statement that would “stress that Korea was acting in its own interest and in common defense rather than as result of financial bargaining with U.S.” While the list of U.S. concessions would help to convince the Korean public of the decision’s justification, these concessions had to appear as “spontaneous” actions of gratitude, rather than as a U.S. purchase.⁸⁴

Despite government efforts to control information, oppositional voices in both countries quickly criticized the ROK’s Vietnam decision with the mercenary label. Senator Stephen Young (D) lambasted the Johnson administration in an address in 1967 where he compared the ROK troops to Great Britain’s use of Hessian mercenaries in the Revolutionary War.⁸⁵ The U.S. Senate investigated the matter in the Symington Subcommittee Hearings from 1969 to 1970. Senators J. William Fulbright (D) and Stuart Symington (D) denounced U.S. compensation to Asian allies for being in “excess of our [U.S.] explicit treaty obligations,” and criticized the “exorbitant mercenary pay.”⁸⁶ In the ROK, opposition leader Yun Po-Sun was nearly arrested for criticizing the decision as a mercenary exchange.⁸⁷ Park’s authoritarian rule made any resistance or public statements against the government’s decision a highly dangerous and often illegal act. In contrast to

⁸⁴ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, February 1, 1966, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁸⁵ Blackburn, 65-66.

⁸⁶ Memorandum From the Chairman of the Interdepartmental Coordinating Group (McClintock) to the Under Secretary of State (Richardson), Washington, October 3, 1969, FRUS, Southeast Asia, 1969-1972, Volume XX.

⁸⁷ Blackburn, 65-66.

the ROKG's heavy-handed censorship, the U.S. faced a vigorous and growing anti-war protest campaign. The mercenary narrative could only add more fuel to the fire.

While the Johnson administration resisted the mercenary interpretation, evidence also showed U.S. State Department officials taking the ROK's contribution for granted as an item to be purchased, and their communications often strengthened the credence of the mercenary narrative. For instance, in seeking the second deployment in 1966, the State Department instructed Brown to "to exert maximum pressure to obtain these forces for a reasonable price."⁸⁸ McGeorge Bundy told William Porter that the U.S. wanted the "maximum additional ROK troop contribution," while avoiding "the 'diminishing returns' and 'Aladdin's Lamp' pitfalls."⁸⁹ As the Vietnam War languished into a quagmire, Dean Rusk, a strong supporter of the Vietnam War, appeared completely insensitive to the ROKG's position. Rusk argued for increased ROK contributions, going as high as 90,000. He concluded "it is entirely reasonable to expect further Korean combat contribution to SVN and that it should not be necessary for US to pay too stiff economic or political price for this contribution."⁹⁰ Such a calculation showed a complete disregard to South Korean domestic opinion, the ROK troops already committed, or political repercussions for Park. In response, Brown was horrified at the thought of asking for additional troops beyond the second combat division:

We asked for a small medical unit and got it (a few hundred). We asked for a much larger non-combat unit and got it (2000 men). We then asked for a combat division and got it (20,000 men). After an embarrassingly short interval we asked

⁸⁸ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, December 30, 1965, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁸⁹ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, November 25, 1967, FRUS, Korea, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁹⁰ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, November 19, 1966, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

for a further combat brigade and division, and we seem to have it (about 30,000 men). Now, before we have even given the Koreans a chance to solidify their decision on the last brigade and division, we are contemplating asking them for ten thousand more. When will this end?⁹¹

Again, Brown expressed a cautious and realistic summary of events. He believed the USG was pushing the issue too far and too fast (“embarrassingly short interval”). The answer to Brown’s question “When will this end?” came sooner than expected. The U.S. continued to request ROK combat troops until 1968, to which the ROKG could have complied in exchange for ever increasing economic rewards. However, the ROKG turned down the last round of negotiations. By 1968, serious North Korean provocations refocused ROKG priorities and shifted their interests. The ROKG joined the Vietnam War to obtain political stability, national defense, and economic opportunity. After 1968, political stability and national defense were both in jeopardy at home, making additional deployments out of the question.

The U.S. financial compensation to ROK soldiers gave the mercenary narrative a powerful credence and staying power, yet this was not the ROKG’s sole motivation. Their goals comprised political, defense, and economic aims in accordance with Park’s national vision. The mercenary narrative’s underlying assumption was one of Korea’s national interests. Did South Korea have a stake in the Vietnam War’s outcome? Their chief rival, North Korea, was also a player in the conflict. What was North Korea doing at this time, and did this impact the ROKG’s decisions? The two would violently clash in a renewed conflict on the Korean peninsula at the same time the Vietnam War raged in the background. South Korea’s position in relation to North Korea may shed additional

⁹¹ Telegram From the Consulate in Hong Kong to the Department of State, Hong Kong, February 13, 1966, FRUS, Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

light on South Korea's interest in the Vietnam War as having their own stake in the conflict.

Chapter 2: A Linked Struggle - The ROK's Stake in Vietnam

“An American victory in Vietnam is a victory for Korea, and an American defeat in Vietnam a defeat for the ROK.”⁹²

- Chung Il Kwon, ROK Prime Minister, March 8, 1968

While U.S. and ROK soldiers waged war in Vietnam, a struggle much closer to South Korea's borders intensified. Historians Mitchell Lerner and Mark Felton refer to this overlooked conflict between South and North Korea from 1966-1969 as the “Second Korean War.”⁹³ The label is fitting for the scope and intensity of the violence. North Korean guerrilla infiltration and border skirmishes along the Korean DMZ increased dramatically and caused hundreds of casualties (including U.S.) on both sides. In January 1968, North Korean commandoes raided the South Korean Blue House in a failed attempt to assassinate Park Chung Hee. Two days later, North Korea seized the U.S. spy ship *Pueblo*, taking captive eighty-three sailors for eleven months. The following year, April 1969, North Korea shot down a U.S. spy plane, killing all thirty-one crew members. Was it merely a coincidence that these events occurred during the height of the Vietnam War, or was there a connection? If such a connection existed, does it add a legitimizing national interest and rationale in the ROK's participation in the Vietnam War, one that challenges the mercenary epithet?

⁹² Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, March 8, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

⁹³ See Mitchell Lerner's essay, “The Second Korean War” for the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program, [Wilson Center Digital Archive](#) (accessed January 18, 2021) and “The Second Korean War: A Forgotten Conflict 1966-1969,” Curiosity Stream/Mark Felton Productions, August 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hpFsKqaIuc>. (accessed September 25, 2020).

Both USG and ROKG saw the Korean peninsula and Vietnam as linked theaters of war. ROKG's interests in Vietnam participation were tied to defense against North Korean aggression at home. Evidence points to North Korean provocations during "The Second Korean War" as intentionally concurrent with the Vietnam War as a window of opportunity to exploit U.S. preoccupation in Vietnam. While North Korean hostilities severely tested the U.S./ROK alliance and began to push their respective interests into misalignment, their provocations also linked USG and ROKG's fates in Vietnam for the duration of the war. ROKG could not withdraw their troops without jeopardizing U.S. defense commitments in Korea. The Second Korean War was a justifying component for the ROKG's Vietnam decision, as they saw themselves in peril of becoming the next Cold War battleground once again.

North Versus South: At Home and Abroad

North and South Korea were both international actors taking advantage of the Vietnam War to suit their own interests, and both linked their efforts in Vietnam back to their rivalry on the peninsula. South Korea, as seen in Chapter 1, leveraged Vietnam deployments to acquire political, defense, and economic concessions from the U.S., aimed with the goal, in the words of the ROK's deputy prime minister, of becoming "stronger than North Korea."⁹⁴ North Korea, on the other hand, exploited the Vietnam War as a window of opportunity to escalate provocations against South Korea and test the waters for a communist reunification of the Korean peninsula. Evidence from diplomatic

⁹⁴ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, January 10, 1966, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

embassies in North Korea reveals a clear connection between renewed North Korean provocations as intentionally concurrent with the Vietnam War. North Korea was emboldened during this period and expected the U.S. to exercise restraint against retaliating due to their preoccupation in Vietnam.

North Korea actively supported the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the Vietnam War. North Korea took notice when South Korea committed troops to Vietnam and responded by stepping up their own support of the DRV. A record of conversation between Kim Il Sung and the Chinese Friendship Delegation in 1965 is quite telling. Kim refers to the “puppet army in South Korea” going to Vietnam and declares “We [North Korea] are supporting Vietnam as if it were our own war.”⁹⁵ In 1965 North Korea sent over 2,000 tons, 80 train cars full, worth of construction materials and military automobiles to North Vietnam.⁹⁶ North Korea also sent 100 Air Force personnel, consisting of pilots and technicians to man two MiG-17 companies (10 planes each) and one MiG-21 company.⁹⁷ North Korea, to a lesser degree than the South, was now an active participant in the Vietnam War.

North and South Korean rivalry directly extended into the Vietnam War itself. Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) ambassador to the DPRK, Nguyen Long

⁹⁵ “Record of Conversation between Premier Kim and the Chinese Friendship Delegation,” August 20, 1965, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 106-01479-05, 46-51. Translated by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118795>.

⁹⁶ “Cable from the Chinese Embassy in North Korea, 'On the Transporting of North Korea's Construction Material Aid for Vietnam',” September 25, 1965, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 109-02845-01, 3. Translated by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118780>.

⁹⁷ “Signing of a Protocol Agreement for North Korea to Send a Number of Pilots to Fight the American Imperialists during the War of Destruction against North Vietnam,” September 30, 1966, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Vietnam Ministry of Defense Central Archives, Central Military Party Committee Collection, File No. 433. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Merle Pribbenow. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113926>.

stated that the DPRK has strong ties to the NLF through their embassy in Hanoi. Ambassador Nguyen reported that North Koreans were active in South Vietnam, and that they are primarily in “those areas where South Korean troops are operating, so as to study their fighting tactics, techniques, combat readiness and the morale of the South Korean Army, and to use propaganda against the South Koreans.”⁹⁸ Another diplomat’s telegram from the DPRK stated that “The [North] Korean people are effectively prepared and always ready to fight alongside the Vietnamese people, whenever the Vietnamese people need it.”⁹⁹ The North Korean Central News agency confirmed this to a U.S. source: “You see we are ready to send our troops at any time whenever Vietnam (North) wants our participation,” and then immediately connected this statement to a threat on the Korean peninsula: “Should a war break out in Korea the US won't be able to send its troops to Korea since it's so deeply involved in the Vietnam war.”¹⁰⁰ These statements support the notion that North Korea’s efforts in Vietnam directly connected to events in Korea.

North Korea’s investment in North Vietnam was linked towards a communist-led reunification of the Korean peninsula. The Soviet Embassy in the DPRK reported in 1966 that China was allegedly pressuring North Korea to restart hostilities along the Korean DMZ.¹⁰¹ In 1967, the Romanian ambassador to the DPRK reported of an upcoming

⁹⁸ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, No. 76.247,” July 06, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Romanian Foreign Ministry Archive. Obtained and translated by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113927>.

⁹⁹ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.040, Regular,” February 12, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Political Affairs Fond, Telegrams from Pyongyang, TOP SECRET, 1968, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113955>.

¹⁰⁰ Telegram From the Commanding General, United States Eighth Army, Korea, and the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler) Seoul, November 10, 1966, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹⁰¹ “First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korean Reports on Sino-Korean Relations in 1966,” December 02, 1966, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF, f. 0102, op. 22, p. 109, d.

“great revolutionary event” in North Korea that would “result in either the definitive solution of the Korean problem and the expulsion of American forces, or the acknowledgment of the existence of two Korean states through an international treaty, which would replace the current armistice.” He predicted that upon North Vietnam’s successful conclusion of the war, the United States would be “politically and militarily paralyzed” and could not possibly assist in yet another Korean War after the sheer exhaustion and drop in international opinion.¹⁰² Another telegram reported, if the U.S. was defeated in Vietnam, “the North Koreans will take advantage of this moment and pursue the liberation of the South.”¹⁰³ Yet another communist observer remarked that DPRK officials “view the Vietnamese events primarily from the point of view of their possible consequences for Korea,” and that the reunification of the Korean peninsula depended “to a large degree on the outcome” of the Vietnam War.¹⁰⁴ Clearly, ample evidence existed to support the connection between the Vietnam War and North Korea’s renewed aggression.

The Korean peninsula reached a state of near war through increased violence and major incidents culminating in 1968. Military provocations from 1965 to 1967 included

22, pp. 38-49. Obtained by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114591>.

¹⁰² “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, No.76.093, TOP SECRET, March 15, 1967,” March 15, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116693>.

¹⁰³ “Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest, TOP SECRET, No. 76.047, Regular,” February 19, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Political Affairs Fond, Telegrams from Pyongyang, TOP SECRET, 1968, Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113959>.

¹⁰⁴ “A 7 May 1967 DVO Memo about Intergovernmental Relations between the DPRK and Romania, the DRV, and Cuba,” May 07, 1967, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF f. 0102, op. 23, p. 112, d. 24, pp. 39-42. Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko and translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116701>.

191 combat engagements at the DMZ and 112 combat engagements south of the ceasefire line. These armed clashes collectively caused 223 North Korean casualties, 412 United Nations casualties, and 116 South Korean casualties. In 1967, there was on average one incident per day.¹⁰⁵ U.S. intelligence began to examine if North Korean attacks were at all related to the Vietnam War.

U.S. intelligence saw a strong connection between North Korean provocations and Vietnam. In 1966, a U.S. intel report analyzing the North's DMZ incursions originally doubted the North Korean intention of opening a "second front" for Vietnam, but instead likely intended their provocations to serve as a warning to the ROK against further deployments to Vietnam.¹⁰⁶ This view evolved overtime. Eighth Army Commanding General Bonesteel cautioned the Joint Chiefs of Staff that these developments [North Korean DMZ incursions] were the "most vicious and flagrant violation of the Armistice Agreement in many years." Bonesteel believed North Korea was testing South Korea's response as a precursor to further action.¹⁰⁷ A year later, the Director of U.S. Defense Research and Engineering, John Foster Jr., confirmed Bonesteel's view: "Based on the theory that the United States cannot support more than one "Vietnam" at a time, he [Kim Il Sung] hopes to create a situation that will prevent the ROK from sending more troops to Vietnam, cripple the ROK economy, cause the United

¹⁰⁵ Park, 282-283.

¹⁰⁶ Intelligence Memorandum Washington, November 8, 1966. No. 1620/66 ARMED INCIDENTS ALONG THE KOREAN DMZ, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹⁰⁷ Telegram From the Commanding General, United States Eighth Army, Korea, and the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler) Seoul, November 10, 1966, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

States to withdraw, and eventually communize the country.”¹⁰⁸ The U.S. interrogation of a North Korean agent revealed: “NK’s evaluate US as so overextended in support [of] Vietnam that we [U.S.] would be unable adequately to reinforce Korea in case of war.”¹⁰⁹ North Korea did not expect a strong U.S. retaliation and increased the level of their provocations. North Korea’s prediction of a limited U.S. response proved to be accurate.

The Blue House Raid on January 21, 1968 was North Korea’s most severe escalation yet. Thirty North Korean commandoes infiltrated the presidential mansion, killed several civilians, and almost made it to Park himself. Their mission, according to one of the infiltrators, was “to chop off President Pak Chung Hee’s head and to shoot to death his key subordinates in that building.”¹¹⁰ South Korean security killed five commandoes and eventually captured all but one of the infiltrators, while 68 South Koreans and 3 Americans died in the process.¹¹¹ The event traumatized Park and his family and led to increased calls for unilateral retaliation from the ROKG. Two days later, another major North Korean incident occurred.

The North Korean seizure of the USS *Pueblo* on January 23, 1968 was another major incident that almost restarted the Korean War. The USS *Pueblo* was an American spy ship taking part in Operation Clickbeetle. Its mission was to gather signals intelligence from North Korea and the USSR in the Sea of Japan. U.S. Navy officials left

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum From the Director of Defense Research and Engineering (Foster) to Secretary of Defense McNamara, Washington, December 7, 1967, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum From Alfred Jenkins of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) Washington, July 26, 1967, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹¹⁰ Document 144 – Editorial Note, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹¹¹ Lerner, “The Blue House Raid,” in “The Second Korean War,” [Wilson Center Digital Archive](#) (accessed January 18, 2021).

the *Pueblo* horrendously unprepared for its mission, inappropriately gave the mission a “minimal” risk, and allocated no support or “on call” forces in case of an incident.¹¹² Alleging the *Pueblo* crossed into North Korean territory, the North Koreans violently seized the ship, which offered no resistance, and took eighty-three men captive.¹¹³ In an ordeal that would last over eleven months, the Johnson administration delicately negotiated for the crew’s release without sparking a renewed Korean War. The seizure of the *Pueblo* left the ROKG scrambling for a renewed call to action against North Korea aggression. The ROKG greatly resented not being included in the negotiations over the release of the *Pueblo*’s crew. The ROK’s Anti-Communist league sponsored a rally of over 100,000 people in Seoul to protest the U.S.’s peaceful response.¹¹⁴ The U.S. walked a tightrope of calming ROKG tempers and negotiating with North Korea, all while the Vietnam War reached its low point.

Considering these major incidents, the U.S. continued to interpret them in the context of Vietnam and speculated as to the possibility of direct coordination by their adversaries. Concerning the *Pueblo* incident’s proximity to the Tet offensive, LBJ directly asked: “Is there one man calling the dance?” Cyrus Vance (Deputy Secretary of Defense) replied he was not certain.¹¹⁵ Outside of the U.S., other countries asked the same question. The USSR also made the linkage. Canadian ambassador to the USSR, R.

¹¹² Mitchell Lerner’s *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 24-49.

¹¹³ There is no historical consensus on whether the *Pueblo* did or did not cross into North Korean waters.

¹¹⁴ Lerner, 131.

¹¹⁵ Folder, "February 15, 1968 - 6:06 p.m. Cyrus Vance meeting on his return from Korea - and other foreign advisors," Papers of Tom Johnson, Box 2, LBJ Presidential Library, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/pp-johnsontom-mtgnotes-b02-f30>.

Ford proposed the question with USSR diplomat S. P. Kozyrev: “Personally, he [Ford] does not believe that such a connection exists but if it does this undoubtedly complicates the position of the Americans,” and “I [S.P. Kozyrev], replied that there really is a connection between the events in Vietnam and Korea” because of the larger U.S. imperial aggression in Vietnam and Korea.¹¹⁶ Bonesteel concluded that North Korea sought to prosecute “porous warfare” akin to the rhetoric of Che Guevara and his call of “Many Vietnams.” U.S. intelligence concluded that North Korea saw the U.S. as overextended in Vietnam and was “unable to adequately assist ROK during this period.”¹¹⁷ Events in the Vietnam War affected USG, ROKG, and DPRK decisions in Korea. The two theaters of war were linked.

The provocations of the “Second Korean War” severely tested U.S./ROK relations. Johnson wrote to Park to reassure him of U.S. commitments: “Our mutual objectives of peace, security and progress in Asia require us to make it entirely clear to the men in Pyongyang and in Hanoi that terror and lawlessness will not succeed and that their diversionary tactics will have no effect.” The U.S. saw Pyongyang and Hanoi’s efforts as one in the same. Johnson ended his letter with: “It is good to be able to share one’s thoughts with a trusted friend and ally.”¹¹⁸ Trust, however, was an item quickly losing stock between the U.S. and ROK.

¹¹⁶ “Record of a Conversation with Canadian Ambassador to the USSR R. Ford,” February 02, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVPRF. f. 102, op. 28, pap. 55, d. 2. Obtained for NKIDP by Sergey Radchenko and translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116720>.

¹¹⁷ Telegram From the Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command and of United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler), Seoul, January 24, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹¹⁸ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, February 4, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

End of the Honeymoon

South Korean historians refer to the period of 1965 to 1968 as a “milwol” (honeymoon) in U.S./ROK relations, referencing the economic and political boosts from the ROK’s combat deployments to Vietnam.¹¹⁹ This is the period when USG and ROKG interests were most aligned. By January 1968, the honeymoon was over, and the two country’s interests began to change. The USG and ROKG sharply diverged on how best to respond to North Korea’s hostilities. Park planned a massive retaliation upon North Korea, directly clashing with the USG plans that urged restraint. The timing could not have been worse. 1968 was the height of the Vietnam War. The North Vietnamese Tet Offensive occurred only eight days after the *Pueblo* incident. The Tet Offensive was a boiling point of the Vietnam War for the U.S. with massive domestic implications spurring anti-war protests. The last thing the U.S. could have stomached was starting a new Korean War at the same time efforts in Vietnam were in crisis.

North Korean provocations tested the limits against a theoretically demoralized and inhibited U.S. military presence intractably entangled in Vietnam. Park, visibly shaken by the Blue House Raid, desired a massive retaliation in kind. ROK intelligence pinpointed six locations across the DMZ where North Korean agents were training for covert missions. Park wanted to strike all six of these areas, but the U.S., fearful of a full-scale war escalating, insisted on restraint. The ROKG chafed at the lack of initiative, telling the embassy “if there is another incident, all bets are off.”¹²⁰ The diverging

¹¹⁹ Byung-Kook Kim, *The Park Chung Hee Era*, Introduction, Kindle Edition, Location 226.

¹²⁰ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, January 24, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

interests of the two countries, the U.S. still focused on Vietnam while the ROK now focused more on home, caused a serious diplomatic rupture.

Park, enraged over U.S. passivity, threatened to withdraw ROK troops from Vietnam. General Westmoreland, who was asking for more troops due to Tet, declared the loss of the ROK's two divisions at this time would be out of the question.¹²¹ In order to placate Park, Johnson gave the ROK an additional \$100 million in military aid, an F-4E Jet Squadron worth \$58 million, and even more preference for business contracting in Vietnam, where South Korea now accounted for over half of all foreign civilians operating business.¹²² Here again, ROKG used their bargaining chip, troops in Vietnam, to leverage even more national defense assets. Despite the concessions, tensions remained high.

U.S./ROK relations entered a phase of steep decline. The ROK grew increasingly suspicious that the U.S. was not seriously concerned with the ROK's security and became equally concerned over "loose talk about [U.S.] pulling back some forces from Vietnam" and abandoning the cause that the ROK had just joined in full force.¹²³ Dean Rusk lamented "the one thing which is not tolerable back here is their [ROK's] suspicion about our basic motives and purposes." He recounted the long history of U.S. lives, aid, and support given to the ROK since the Korean War and found their present mistrust "incomprehensible to the American people." Rusk further stated:

We do not expect the Republic of Korea to be a satellite of the United States nor do we expect the United States to be a satellite of Korea. We have elementary and

¹²¹ Lerner, 133.

¹²² Lerner, 136.

¹²³ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, February 7, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

basic common interests and the United States has done its full share in supporting these common interests. We expect no less from the Koreans.¹²⁴

Rusk's comments affirmed the "common interests" of anti-communism between the USG and ROKG. However, the two countries' common interests were beginning to diverge. ROKG always had its eye on North Korea. Participating in Vietnam was a means towards surpassing and deterring their rival. After the 1968 provocations, ROKG felt side-lined and was losing patience with the lack of USG response towards overt North Korean actions. The USG had no interest in direct retaliation towards North Korea for fearing of escalating another large-scale war concurrent with Vietnam.

General Bonesteel was gravely concerned of restarting a new Korean War. He called the ROKG an "orgy of emotionalism."¹²⁵ Bonesteel further referenced the Park administration as a "Mad Hatter's tea party atmosphere" and Park's "apres moi le deluge"¹²⁶ attitude. These characterizations suggested a dire and unstable ROKG that could escalate a new Korean War at any given moment, putting the U.S. in a precarious position. With the Vietnam War losing support at home in the U.S., starting another war in Korea would have been unthinkable. Bonesteel, sympathetic to the ROKG's situation, advised his superiors: "I wish to state frankly that we have given him [Park] no real idea of what we intend to do or alternative courses, and so I believe we have brought large part of it on ourselves." South Koreans now accused the U.S. of being a "silken fist in a silken glove," meaning they were not the Cold War super-power that they appeared to

¹²⁴ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, February 6, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹²⁵ Telegram From the Commander in Chief, United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp), Seoul, February 7, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹²⁶ "After me, the flood" – a reference to Louis XV in the eighteenth century.

be.¹²⁷ The lack of U.S. response to North Korea was unacceptable to the ROKG, who saw U.S. as hanging them out to dry in their hour of need. USG and ROKG interests became misaligned.

President Johnson attempted to cool the tensions of the 1968 rupture. Johnson dispatched Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance as his personal envoy to salvage the deteriorating situation. Vance found Park highly despondent, increasingly turning to alcoholism and even domestic violence (he threw an ash tray at his wife). While Vance was successful in dissuading Park from invading the North, relations suffered greatly. Upon his return, Vance reported “the depth of feeling is very deep...a loss of face,” over the lack of U.S. response to the *Pueblo* incident, that South Korea directly blames the U.S. and there was a “strong danger of unilateral action” by the ROKG.¹²⁸ The conversation lamented on the declining relations between the two countries. Vance reported that Park was determined to retaliate and unconcerned about widening the conflict. Vance relayed: “Pak is convinced that the North Koreans are going to try to take over South Korea by 1970. He said that if they tried to attack Blue House again that he would retaliate and that much blood would be shed and that there would be much pain and suffering.”¹²⁹

While USG and ROKG common interests appeared to be falling out of alignment, a direct consequence of the “Second Korean War” hostilities firmly tied the ROK to

¹²⁷ Telegram From the Commander in Chief, United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp), Seoul, February 9, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹²⁸ Folder, "February 15, 1968 - 6:06 p.m. Cyrus Vance meeting on his return from Korea - and other foreign advisors," Papers of Tom Johnson, Box 2, LBJ Presidential Library, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/pp-johnsontom-mtgnotes-b02-f30>.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Vietnam. By 1968, the United States would not allow South Korea to withdraw its troops from Vietnam without severe consequences. This was an urgent point in a conference with LBJ and his advisors:

Clark Clifford [Secretary of Defense]: Did you get any threat at all, even a veiled threat, about withdrawing [ROK] troops from South Vietnam?

Mr. Vance [Deputy Secretary of Defense]: The [ROK] Prime Minister mentioned that the legislature might ask for that. I told him very bluntly that we would remove our troops from South Korea if that happened. The Prime Minister turned ashen. It really shook him.

Clark Clifford: Then you think they are clear on that?

Mr. Vance: Yes.¹³⁰

Following the Tet offensive, the U.S. war effort in Vietnam was losing all semblance of public support at home. The prospect of the ROK withdrawing their 50,000 troops was militarily unacceptable. Rusk put it bluntly: “We cannot entertain suspicions about the loyalty of the United States to its alliances at a time when we have just lost 900 killed in a ten-day period in Viet-Nam.”¹³¹ Simultaneously, the U.S. was terrified that the ROK would re-initiate hostilities with the North unilaterally and entangle the U.S. in another war. Clark Clifford called Park a “weak reed we are leaning on” and that the U.S. must “disengage ourselves from any possibility of unilateral action.”¹³²

Of course, it was the ROKG that was now “entangled” with the USG. If the ROKG removed their troops from Vietnam, then the USG would withdraw from South Korea, precisely what North Korea hoped to accomplish. This put the ROKG in an

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, February 11, 1968., FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹³² Folder, "February 15, 1968 - 6:06 p.m. Cyrus Vance meeting on his return from Korea - and other foreign advisors," Papers of Tom Johnson, Box 2, LBJ Presidential Library, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.discoverlbj.org/item/pp-johnsontom-mtgnotes-b02-f30>.

equally delicate position. According to the U.S. embassy, when Prime Minister Chung heard this news, he “gasp[ed], sputter[ed] and immediately went out” to inform the President’s Chief of Staff.¹³³ Mistrust between the two abounded, yet U.S. and ROK fates were now sealed for the duration of the Vietnam War. Through a twisted series of events, the ROK military in Vietnam was now directly supporting national defense at home in South Korea, as their presence abroad kept U.S. defense commitments at home in Korea.

While the events of “The Second Korean War” severely tested and damaged U.S./ROK relations, they also linked the fates of the U.S./ROK military partnership in Vietnam for the long haul. Despite declining relations, the U.S. continued to press for more ROK troops in Vietnam as late as March 1968. ROK Prime Minister Yi Kwon Chung responded favorably; he postulated sending another two divisions and stated, “an American victory in Vietnam is a victory for Korea, and an American defeat in Vietnam a defeat for the ROK.”¹³⁴ However, Park turned down the proposal, saying “it would be impossible” considering South Korea’s current situation, but afterwards Park still floated the idea of sending more civilian support. Furthermore, Park advocated for removing all restrictions against enemy targets in North Vietnam. He envisioned himself taking up a greater role in the war’s direction. He attended the Honolulu Conference in 1968 and continuously advocated for the ROKG to be represented in any diplomatic negotiations

¹³³ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, February 14, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹³⁴ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, March 8, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

regarding Vietnam.¹³⁵ The ROKG still saw a national interest and their national prestige tied to winning the Vietnam War.

However, a final setback in future ROK commitments came when President Johnson announced he would not run for a second term. Park was particularly shaken by this, as the two had a close and warm relationship. Walt Rostow relayed to Johnson after Park heard the news: “Park has shown great unhappiness over your [Johnson’s] personal decision and has even expressed the feeling that he should have been consulted, as an old and true friend. Above all, he fears that without your leadership the US may abandon the Asian policies it has been following.”¹³⁶ Park’s fears ultimately came to fruition in the Nixon administration. However, the ROK military commitment to Vietnam never wavered. By this point, ROKG clearly saw its fate as linked to the U.S. war effort. Park feared that in the event of a defeat in Vietnam and U.S. withdrawal from the region, South Korea would be the next Cold War battleground once again. He had plenty of evidence of this already in front of him through North Korea’s latest provocations.¹³⁷

In summation, events on the Korean peninsula were intricately connected to the Vietnam War that gave the ROKG a legitimate national interest. North and South Korea each had a unique position and agenda in their role during this period. North Korea sought to exploit a window of opportunity to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the ROK and probe a communist reunification of Korea. To an extent, North Korea was

¹³⁵ Summary of Conversations Between President Johnson and President Pak, Honolulu, April 17, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹³⁶ Telegram From the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson in Texas, Washington, April 13, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹³⁷ Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, March 8, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

successful in their first goal; U.S./ROK relations were put to the test and strained by the 1968 rupture. However, it also forced South Korea to link its future to the U.S. war in Vietnam. They could not withdraw their troops without significant consequences. Many observers could use this evidence to argue in favor the mercenary narrative, that the USG was exerting pressure on the ROKG to retain their Vietnam commitment. While this is true, the ROKG also saw their fortunes tied to the outcome of the Vietnam War and perceived a real danger in a U.S. defeat and withdrawal from the region. Pending a communist victory, the ROKG saw themselves as the next Vietnam, with a very real North Korean threat beating down their door. In addition to U.S. pressure, the ROKG stayed committed to winning the war in Vietnam through their own interest as a national actor.

Was this national interest convincing enough for the ROK military to escape the “mercenary” label? The next chapter will focus on the ROK military in Vietnam to examine the relationship between U.S. and ROK forces and the ROK’s military performance. A topic often neglected in most historians’ accounts, a close analysis of the ROK troops themselves can provide further insights regarding the mercenary debate and uncovering the significance of the ROK’s contribution to the Vietnam War.

Chapter 3: Allies or Mercenaries? The ROK Military in Vietnam

“The success ROK forces have enjoyed in Vietnam has been remarkable, but not well publicized nor understood.”¹³⁸

– Major Ronald R. Rasmussen, U.S. Army, January 1968

Just one hour before midnight on August 9, 1966, a Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) Officer of the 9th Company, 1st Cavalry Regiment, heard digging outside his defensive perimeter at Landing Zone Twenty-Seven Victor, Pleiku Province. The Korean officer relayed his suspicions of enemy movement to the American tank commander of a U.S. platoon temporarily under Korean operational control for this mission. The tank shined its searchlight on the area along with reconnoitering machine gun fire. Suddenly, a North Vietnamese Army battalion burst into a violent attack on the ROKA position. Over a six-hour battle, repeated waves of North Vietnamese soldiers attacked from all directions with support from recoilless rifles, mortars, and rockets. Korean infantry and American tanks working together fiercely defended the assault into the early morning hours of the following day. A single North Vietnamese soldier penetrated the ROKA’s perimeter, only to be quickly eliminated by a Korean bayonet. When the sun rose the next morning, it became clear that the enemy battalion was decimated with nearly 200 casualties, while the ROKA and U.S. soldiers suffered only 7 casualties themselves. Two

¹³⁸ Ronald R. Rasmussen, “ROK Operations in Central Vietnam,” *Military Review* vol. XLVIII no. 1 (January 1968): 51.

years later, President Johnson awarded both the Korean and American units involved the Presidential Unit Citation, the highest military award any unit can achieve.¹³⁹

To this point, this thesis has argued that ROKG national interests led them to contribute to the Vietnam War. Chapter 1 argued that President Park's need for political stability was the primary motivation which allowed ROK troops to become political leverage to gain national security and economic concessions. Chapter 2 showed that these concessions were a dire necessity, as South Korea faced the prospect of a renewed Korean War at home against its rival, North Korea, that began to shift its interests out of alignment with USG. Chapter 3 offers new information on the rarely studied Korean military effort in Vietnam itself to see if any insight can be gained on the proper characterization of ROK forces and the extent of their contribution. How can one define the relationship between the U.S. and ROK militaries and how effective was the ROK military in Vietnam?

The ROKA's relationship to the U.S. military and their degree of effectiveness tied back to ROKG's national interests. The ROKA intentionally sought out an independent and autonomous command relationship to the U.S. Army, with an eye on avoiding the mercenary appearance and upholding national prestige. In the war's early years (1965-1968, the "honeymoon" period under President Johnson) when USG and ROKG were most aligned, the ROKA's performance appeared at its peak in effectiveness and operational significance. In the eyes of U.S. commanders, the ROKA's performance noticeably declined in the war's later years (1969-1973, under President Nixon) which

¹³⁹ P.P. Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968 Book 2, 413 – Presidential Unit Citation Awarded the 9th Company, 3d Battalion, 1st Cavalry Regiment, Capital Republic of Korea Infantry Division, Republic of Korea Army. July 26, 1968, 414. (see page 323 for the American Unit).

matches the timeframe when USG and ROKG interests fell out of alignment. By 1969, the USG began looking for a way to end the Vietnam War and drawdown U.S. military presence in Asia, while ROKG was more concerned than ever about a hostile North Korea and sought to retain U.S. defense commitments. The ROKA's military performance in Vietnam was best characterized as a self-directed, national force, whose level of effort paralleled the ROKG's level of shared interest with USG.

Defining the Relationship

How should a historian, or indeed the American public at large, characterize the ROK military in Vietnam? Were they mercenaries? The U.S. paid 100% of all costs related to their deployments. If that alone makes them mercenaries, as some scholars argue, then the discussion is over. But there is a counter argument. ROK soldiers represented the South Korean nation in the pursuit of South Korean interests. They were allies. Formal definitions, the nature of the U.S./ROK military command relationship, and the ROK soldiers' motivations will make this case.

First, definitions of the nomenclature do not support the mercenary label. Merriam-Webster defines "mercenary" as "one who serves merely for wages, especially a soldier hired into foreign service." Chapters 1 and 2 have shown the complex geo-political events that led South Korea into Vietnam. The ROK soldiers cannot be said to be serving only for wages or in foreign service. They served in the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) and Marines, fighting under the South Korean flag, for South Korean leaders, for South Korean political interests. Accordingly, Merriam-Webster's definition of "alliance" is more fitting: "an association to further common interests of the members."

¹⁴⁰ Again the question of “common interests” is the crux. Previous chapters have shown the USG and ROKG interests did align in Vietnam in ways beyond a simple anti-communism or “domino theory.” The ROKG used Vietnam to gain an edge against its rival North Korea, and later saw U.S. defense commitments to Korea as contingent on the ROK’s presence in Vietnam. A counterargument would easily suggest “mercenaries” can also be “allies,” and therefore the definitions are not exclusive. How else can scholars separate the two?

One supporter of the mercenary narrative points to the Geneva Convention as evidence for the ROKA as mercenaries.¹⁴¹ This is simply wrong. The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 have absolutely no mention of the term “mercenary.”¹⁴² In fact, the first legal definition of the term “mercenary” did not appear until after the Vietnam War, in the 1977 Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention. Even then, Article 47 defines a mercenary as follows:

- (a) is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict;
- (b) does, in fact, take a direct part in the hostilities;
- (c) is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that Party;
- (d) is neither a national of a Party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a Party to the conflict;
- (e) is not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict; and
- (f) has not been sent by a State which is not a Party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “mercenary”, s.v. “alliance”, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mercenary>, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alliance> (accessed October 2, 2020).

¹⁴¹ Hernández, 13, 36.

¹⁴² Katherine Fallah, “Corporate Actors: The Legal Status of Mercenaries in Armed Conflict,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 88, no. 863, (September 2006): 604.

¹⁴³ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977. Article 47 <https://ihl->

A person must meet all six criteria to be classified as a mercenary by the Geneva Convention. With this definition, ROK soldiers in Vietnam cannot be legally defined as mercenaries due to conditions d, e, and f. South Korea *was* formally a party to the conflict, and ROK soldiers were officially uniformed members of its armed forces.

Definitions aside, the term “mercenary” is more often used in a broader sense to criticize the ROKG’s motivations for joining the conflict. As Katherine Fallah points out, the term “mercenary” is a loaded term to express disapproval of a person’s motivation in a political, rather than a legal context.¹⁴⁴ That large percentages of the public in both U.S. and South Korea condemned their countries’ presence in Vietnam is not in doubt and explains the origin and lasting presence of the mercenary label. Going beyond formal definitions may be more helpful in arguing for or against the mercenary narrative on a rhetorical level.

Secondly, the special nature of the U.S./ROK command relationship in Vietnam did not support “mercenary” label. Simply put, ROK units did not fall under direct U.S. operational control (OPCON). Instead, they were in control of their own troops. They were under no legal authority to obey U.S. orders if they chose not to. According to the U.S. Army’s Field Manual 3-16, “The Army in Multinational Operations,” there are four possible command structures between partner nations: integrated, lead-nation, combination, or parallel.¹⁴⁵ In the first three arrangements, partner nations either form a joint headquarters or fall directly under the lead nation’s headquarters for command and

databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=9EDC5096D2C036E9C12563CD0051DC30.

¹⁴⁴ Fallah, 602.

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-16, “The Army in Multinational Operations” (Washington D.C., Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014), 2-2.

control, or some combination of the two. In the final arrangement, the parallel command, partner nations remain separate and independent entities, with no direct command control of the other. Notably, the U.S. Army deems a parallel structure as “not the preferred structure because of the absence of a single coalition commander and lack of unity of command.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, it was even more significant that the ROK forces in Vietnam (ROKFV) formally had a *parallel command* structure with U.S. forces, going against U.S. doctrinal preferences.

The desire to remain formally autonomous and independent was important to the ROKG’s national prestige. The ROK military was formally in Vietnam at the request of the South Vietnamese government in the larger regional struggle against communism. The senior commander for ROKFV, Lieutenant General Chae Myung Shin worked out a “gentlemen’s agreement” with U.S. General William Westmoreland, in which a parallel command structure would be maintained, but Chae promised to “honor any requests” Westmoreland made upon ROKFV.¹⁴⁷ This amounted to a “de facto” OPCON of the ROKFV to U.S. commanders, but not officially. The ROK withheld the option to decline U.S. orders. The distinction was meaningful, in that Westmoreland had formal OPCON of all other partner nations yet LTG Chae explicitly refused the arrangement when Westmoreland raised the question.¹⁴⁸ The OPCON issue even came up in communications with President Johnson, who once asked Rostow to direct Cyrus Vance to “request Korean permission for Westy [Westmoreland] to redeploy Korean forces if

¹⁴⁶ U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-16, 2-3.

¹⁴⁷ Michael Liscano Jr., “Multinational Force Integration: The ROK Army’s Integration with the US Army in the Vietnam War” (Monograph from School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, Ft. Leavenworth KS, 2016), 33-35.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

necessary,” a power that Westmoreland did not have.¹⁴⁹ ROKFV clung to their own operational autonomy.

Video evidence taken by the U.S. Signal Corps offered further clues that support the nature of ROKFV’s autonomy and presence as a separate, national actor. ROKFV had control in their own bases and their own area of operations. In the images below, notice the chain of command bulletin board, a visual display of the hierarchy of authority in military units, appears to show Park Chung Hee at the top, not American generals (on all American military chain of command boards, the U.S. president is always at the top). Park was the ROKA Commander in Chief. Furthermore, notice the nature of the ROK national flag; it is to the right of the American flag, signaling a higher place of honor (in U.S. military tradition, the American Flag is always the right-most flag in ceremonies). In some instances, the American Flag is not even present at all. Lastly, notice the ROKA conducting their own independent war gaming with their own terrain model of the battlefield. That they conducted their own independent planning, rather than taking all orders from Americans, further shows their autonomy.

¹⁴⁹ Information Memorandum From the Chairman of the Korean Task Force (Brown) to Secretary of State Rusk, Washington, March 12, 1968, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.



Figure 1 - Flags Over Tiger Division HQ

Three flags flew over the Tiger Division's HQ – ROK, RVN, U.S. Notice the ROK Flag is flying highest and on the right-most side (Flag's POV), in military tradition, the place of honor. September 25, 1968.



Figure 1 - Tiger Division War Museum

Two soldiers tour the Tiger Division's war museum in Vietnam. This appears to be a military Chain of Command board showing Park Chung Hee on top as Commander in Chief. September 1, 1968.

Source: Film Reel – ROK ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM (TIGER INFANTRY DIVISION), Motion Picture Films from the Army Library Copy Collection, 1964 – 1980, Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, 1860 – 1985, RG 111, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32157>, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32159> (accessed October 1, 2020).



Figure 5 - Tiger Division Wargaming

This evidence shows the Tiger Division conducting its own independent military planning in its area of operations. Notice again what appears to be a Park Chung Hee portrait, the Korean national flag, and the absence of an American flag. September 1, 1968. Source: Film Reel – ROK ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM (TIGER INFANTRY DIVISION), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32157> (accessed October 2, 2020).



Figure 6 - ROKA Ceremony at Qui Nhon

ROKA at the opening ceremony of an Agricultural Center for Vietnamese civilians in Qui Nhon. Notice only the ROK and RVN flags were present. There was no American flag present. September 4, 1969. Source: Film Reel – ROK ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM (TIGER INFANTRY DIVISION), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/33145> (accessed October 1, 2020).

Supporters of the mercenary narrative would counter that the parallel command structure was on paper only. Operationally, ROKFV fell under the U.S. I Field Force. Indeed, ROKFV was heavily embedded within U.S. planning. As the ROK's ranking representative in Vietnam, LTG Chae established a ROKA Corps level headquarters in Saigon and desired to be seen on equal terms with other commanders of his rank.¹⁵⁰ ROKFV headquarters was only a quarter mile down the road from the I Field Force HQ.¹⁵¹ ROKA Officers did not serve on a combined staff with Americans, but instead functioned through liaison officers that met four to five times a week for intelligence sharing, staff meetings, and planning. The commander of I Field Force, LTG Stanley Larsen, recalled that planning with Koreans was very smooth and well-coordinated.¹⁵² Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) delimited ROKFV's area of operations

¹⁵⁰ Lieutenant General Stanley Robert Larsen and Brigadier General James Lawton Collins Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Department of the Army, Washington, D.C.: CMH Pub 90-5-1, 2005, first printed 1975), 138.

¹⁵¹ Liscano, 39.

¹⁵² Larsen and Collins, 138-139.

and overall, big picture, mission goals. Realistically, ROKFV was one spoke in the wheel to MACV's larger picture. However, a "gentlemen's agreement" to honor requests is not the same thing as operational control. It is also worth noting that all other U.S. allies (Thailand, The Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand) *did* fall under direct U.S. command and control.¹⁵³ ROKFV, while highly embedded and coordinating with MACV, was not subject to direct orders from Westmoreland, Larsen, or any other American officer. Within their own area of operations, ROKFV had their own bases, planned their own unit missions, and called their own shots.

Turning to the final point of contention, the mercenary argument gives primacy to the financial compensation as the ROK soldiers' motivation. The U.S. paid ROK soldiers \$37.50 monthly, a rate twenty-three times higher than a ROK soldier made in Korea (\$1.60 monthly).¹⁵⁴ This was considerably cheaper than the U.S. paid their own soldiers. A ROK soldier in Vietnam earned between \$5,000 and \$7,800 per year, while a U.S. soldier in Vietnam averaged around \$13,000 a year.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, the majority of ROKFV consisted of volunteers (upwards of 60%), leading many outside observers to conclude financial motives were paramount. However, the motivations for individual soldiers to serve in Vietnam were complex and multi-faceted, such that financial payment alone cannot explain the high numbers of ROK volunteers.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Larsen and Collins, 13-16, 29, 45, 89, 131-134. The ROK "Dove Unit" was originally under U.S. operational control prior to the ROK's combat deployments.

¹⁵⁴ Mel Gurtov, James Larson, and Robert Swartout Jr., *Korea's Amazing Century: From Kings to Satellites* ed. Ray Weisenborn (Seoul: Korea Fulbright Foundation and Korean-American Educational Commission, 1996), 52.

¹⁵⁵ Blackburn, 65.

¹⁵⁶ Eun Seo Jo, "Fighting for Peanuts: Reimagining South Korean Soldiers' Participation in the Wollam Boom," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 1 (2014), 63.

The average South Korean soldier had several motives for volunteering in Vietnam. Finances were important but not out of a selfish or lucrative pursuit. Since the Korean War, South Korea faced tremendous poverty. The average family earned the equivalent of about 34 U.S. dollars monthly in 1965.¹⁵⁷ Through volunteering, ROK soldiers found a chance to aid their families in alleviating poverty and fulfill their breadwinner roles. The average soldier remitted 80% of his earnings back to his family.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, South Korean men placed tremendous esteem in military service as a means to fulfill one's masculinity; one veteran remembered "Men must fight in war, that's how we become men...I was excited at the thought of war."¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, Park initiated a massive national public relations campaign to support the war effort, including elaborate send-off ceremonies where women and children cheered on the departing soldiers. Park wanted the public to view the war as a means for South Korea to regain international prestige, fight off the communist threat, and repay a debt of honor to the U.S. from their intervention during the Korean War.¹⁶⁰ Han Ki-sun, a South Korean pilot, remembered "At the time it was the most valuable contribution a healthy man could offer to the country."¹⁶¹ National pride, a sense of masculine honor and duty, and taking care of one's family were paramount.

Considering definitions of nomenclature, the nature of the ROKFV's command relationship to MACV, and the individual ROK soldier's motivations, the ROK soldiers

¹⁵⁷ Eun Seo Jo, 67.

¹⁵⁸ Eun Seo Jo, 71.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Eun Seo Jo, 80.

¹⁶⁰ Eun Seo Jo, 76.

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Eun Seo Jo, 79.

in Vietnam deserved better than a pejorative mercenary label. They fought for their country, South Korea. To take matters further, they fought very well. They were not a token presence merely for the sake of international legitimacy. ROKFV's contribution to the war effort in Vietnam was considerable. Although they did much to aid the U.S., their efforts also caused controversy over alleged human rights abuses that would leave a conflicted record of service.

Helping or Hurting: Military Assessment

Republic of Korea Forces Vietnam (ROKFV) effectively assisted the U.S. war effort. The original presence of the Dove Unit alone in 1964 would have sufficed for Johnson's goal of international recognition; thus, the requesting of actual combat troops reflected a real necessity. In the war's early years (1965-1968) U.S. military leaders and politicians spoke favorably of ROKFV's performance and notably bestowed many accolades to ROK servicemembers. Despite the mostly positive assessment, this impression declined over time, paralleling the war's lack of progress and shifting USG and ROKG interests. Lastly, ROKFV was allegedly involved in human rights abuse scandals that scarred the memory of their service. Despite these controversies, ROKFV's overall contribution to the U.S. war effort furthered U.S. military objectives, and they made a strong case study for the use of U.S. military allies in regional conflicts.

From a purely military perspective, the ROK contribution to Vietnam was operationally significant. ROKFV assumed control of a 280-mile coastal area from Phu Cat Mountain to Phang Rang, an area with one million Vietnamese civilian residents.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Rasmussen, 51.

ROKFV's presence directly relieved U.S. units from these positions and allowed them to assume a more offensive posture along the Laos and Cambodia border regions. The standing 50,000 ROKFV directly translated to a one for one substitute; U.S. commanders stated at the time that if the ROK did not send a division, an American division would have to go in its place.¹⁶³ This saved 50,000 Americans from the unpopular draft back home. Furthermore, ROKFV engaged in numerous combat operations including successful joint operations with U.S. forces.

ROKFV and the U.S. military conducted multiple joint operations during the Vietnam War that demonstrated the partnership's success. The most well-known joint operation was "Operation Paul Revere II" and the Battle of Landing Zone 27 Victor (the opening anecdote of this chapter). Uniquely, in this specific instance, a ROKA infantry company had tactical control (TACON) of a U.S. tank platoon (the ROK company commander was temporarily in command of U.S. soldiers). Through a coordinated effort involving ROK Infantry, U.S. tanks, and combined ROK and U.S. artillery, the ROK and U.S. forces won the six-hour battle.¹⁶⁴ The combined force killed 197 NVA soldiers, while losing only 7 ROK soldiers and no American casualties. The U.S. tank platoon reportedly had "endless praise" for the Korean unit.¹⁶⁵

A second highlight, Operation Irving was another successful joint U.S./ROK/ARVN endeavor. From September to October 1966, the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division, ROK Capital Division, and ARVN 22nd Division conducted joint operations to

¹⁶³ Larsen and Collins, 128.

¹⁶⁴ Liscano, 1-4.

¹⁶⁵ Larsen and Collins, 141.

clear the NVA 3rd Division out of the Phu Cat Mountains. The ROK Division acted as an “anvil,” in their role to clear the mountains and block southern retreat routes. The U.S. 1st CAV acted as the “hammer” and led the main attack. Together, U.S., ROK, and ARVN forces achieved success in forcing the NVA to retreat and lose critical logistical bases, including enemy casualties numbering 2,063 killed and 1,409 captured. Of these, the ROKA unit reportedly killed 1,161 enemy, while losing only 30 ROKA soldiers.¹⁶⁶ U.S. General Stanley Larsen recalled the ROKA’s performance was “extraordinarily thorough and effective.”¹⁶⁷ The operation was an overwhelming success and demonstrated the capabilities of multinational operations.

Beyond joint operations, ROKFV was successful through independent operations without direct U.S. assistance. ROKFV actively patrolled its area of operations daily, seeking out the enemy and denying NVA and VC freedom of movement. As a sample, the ROKFV G-3 (Operations Officer) reported highly successful statistics during the 3rd Quarter 1969 report to the Combined Campaign Plan. The ROKFV G-3 reported 43 battalion size operations, 6 regimental size operations, and over 459 total battalion maneuver days. ROKFV engaged in 232 contacts with the enemy, resulting in 1,327 KIA, 19 prisoners, and captured 608 small arms weapons and 25 crew-served weapons.¹⁶⁸ These statistics were enough to impress top U.S. Generals who commended the Koreans. General William Peers, a subsequent commander of I Field Force, remarked that Korean operations were a “fine state of art” for their “phenomenal” kill ratios,

¹⁶⁶ Liscano, 51-54.

¹⁶⁷ Larsen and Collins, 140.

¹⁶⁸ ROKFV-FID CMD G-3 Report, Combined Campaign Plan 3rd Quarterly Review, found in File Unit: 201-29 Helicopters in Psyop, 1969, General Records, 1969-1972, RG 472, Records of the U.S. Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1976, NARA. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/74207857> (accessed October 7, 2020).

reaching as high as 100 to 1, and a higher rate of capturing enemy weapons compared to U.S. soldiers.¹⁶⁹ General Larsen similarly commented: “Every time the Koreans performed a mission, they did it well.”¹⁷⁰ In 1975, Larsen wrote a historical study on the Army’s use of allied forces in which he unequivocally praised ROKFV: “The Koreans, who asked for very little credit, have received almost no recognition in the U.S. press and it is doubtful if many Americans fully appreciate their contributions in South Vietnam.”¹⁷¹ Other U.S. observers had the same impression.

Another outspoken supporter of ROKFV’s performance was Major Ronald R. Rasmussen, a U.S. Army officer who worked in I Field Force in Vietnam and directly observed ROKFV in action. He praised them in a 1968 *Military Review* article:

The key to the Korean’s success is the individual ROK soldier. He is undoubtedly one of the best soldiers in the Free World. Tough, aggressive, well disciplined, patient, persistent, and thorough, he keeps his equipment in top condition and responds almost instinctively to orders and instructions. One veteran US officer, who has served with US infantry units in three conflicts, called him “the epitome of a soldier, almost faultless.”¹⁷²

Rasmussen went on to highlight the ROK’s success characterized by aggressive patrolling operations, a “sister program” of securing strategic hamlets, and emphasizing civil affairs with the Vietnamese populace.¹⁷³ ROKFV’s contribution extended beyond combat operations.

In addition to their combat prowess, ROKFV aided humanitarian efforts as well. ROKFV held sporting events, taekwondo demonstrations, and community feasts to win

¹⁶⁹ Larsen and Collins, 150-151.

¹⁷⁰ Larsen and Collins, 150.

¹⁷¹ Larsen and Collins, 145.

¹⁷² Rasmussen, 54.

¹⁷³ Rasmussen, 55.

local support.¹⁷⁴ In 1970, ROK officers requested special funds for construction projects at Ninh An Village, a request that pleasantly surprised U.S. officers who called it “commendable” and commented that ROK “engineering expertise should certainly be exploited.”¹⁷⁵ The ROKFV’s “Dove Unit” of engineers and medical personnel treated 30,000 patients, constructed 3 bridges, 4 schools, 2 dispensaries, and 2 hamlet offices.¹⁷⁶ U.S. Signal Corps video footage (below) recorded ROK units engaged in wider humanitarian efforts such as housing construction, building an agricultural center and an orphanage, and hosting taekwondo instruction to ARVN soldiers. This is significant in showing the impact of a U.S. ally going far beyond token, rhetorical support, but instead contributing both military and nonmilitary aid that had a noticeable impact, at least in the eyes of U.S. commanders.

¹⁷⁴ Rasmussen, 55.

¹⁷⁵ 1619-02 Ninh An Village Project, 1970, General Records, 1969-1972, RG 472, Records of the U.S. Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1976, NARA. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/74216066> (accessed October 8, 2020).

¹⁷⁶ Larsen and Collins, 123.



Figure 8 - ROKA Activities in Vietnam

(Top Left) ROK Taekwondo instructor training ARVN Soldiers, August 26, 1968. (Top Right) ROKA Soldiers constructing housing, August 26, 1968. (Bottom Left) ROKA presents a captured VC Weapons Cache. (Bottom Right) ROKA soldiers on patrol (date illegible in video). Source: Film Reel – ROK ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM (TIGER INFANTRY DIVISION), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32118> <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/33145> (accessed October 8, 2020).

Early in the war, Americans openly applauded and awarded ROKFV's efforts in Vietnam with numerous accolades. In a conference with ROK Prime Minister Chung Il Kwon, President Johnson relayed that General Westmoreland believed "there are no finer fighting men in Viet-Nam than the Korean troops there," and told him to "tell the mothers of these fine boys just how proud we all are...".¹⁷⁷ The U.S. Defense Department awarded ROK Defense Minister Kim Sung Eun the Legion of Merit decoration.¹⁷⁸ LTG

¹⁷⁷ Memorandum of Conversation Washington, March 14, 1967, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹⁷⁸ Memorandum of Conversation Washington, June 22, 1966, FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

Creighton Abrams personally attended and spoke at a ROKA award ceremony in Vietnam in 1968. LTG Abrams awarded the Bronze Star Medal to about a dozen ROKA soldiers. Most prestigiously of all, LTG Abrams presented the Presidential Unit Citation (the highest possible unit award) to the ROKA's 9th Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Cavalry Regiment, Capital Division. Evidently, Americans strongly valued the ROK contribution, at least in the war's early years. This impression would not last through to the Nixon administration as the war effort became increasingly strained and USG and ROKG interests shifted, all in addition to startling revelations and allegations of human rights abuses.



Figure 11 - ROKA Award Ceremony

(Top-Left) – LTG Abrams awards the Bronze Star Medal to ROKA soldiers. (Top-Right) LTG Abrams awards the Presidential Unit Citation to ROKA Unit. (Bottom-Left) LTG Abrams and LTG Chae presiding over the award ceremony. (Bottom-Right) ROKA troops in formation at award ceremony. September 25, 1968. Source: Film Reel – ROK ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM (TIGER INFANTRY DIVISION), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32159> (accessed October 1, 2020).

Despite the praise and awards early in the war, the U.S. assessment of ROK forces declined over time, paralleling changing priorities of both USG and ROKG national interests. By 1971, with the new Nixon administration committed to ending the war and reducing U.S. presence in Asia, the war effort sank further into a quagmire. American opinion of ROK forces appeared to sink along with it. In a memo debating how best to withdraw U.S. and ROK troops from Vietnam, Henry Kissinger advised President

Nixon that “almost all observers agree that the ROKFV are not now being used to greatest advantage.” Kissinger stated: “Initially very effective in combat...they have appeared reluctant to undertake offensive operations.”¹⁷⁹ Rumors circulated among U.S. Generals that ROKFV was now operating on secret instructions from Seoul to minimize casualties by reducing operations.¹⁸⁰ By 1971, even LTG Abrams reportedly said the ROK’s “were not pulling their weight.”¹⁸¹ Subsequent commanders of I Field Force similarly held criticism. General Arthur Collins said the entire ROKFV was the equivalent of “one good U.S. Brigade,” and General Charles Brown criticized the Koreans for spending too much time planning and not enough time executing operations.¹⁸²

Why did U.S. Generals’ opinion of the Koreans turn sour as the war stagnated? General Larsen postulated in hindsight that the quality of Korean volunteers may have declined as the war dragged on, and he also acknowledged a suspicion of instructions from Park to LTG Chae regarding toning down offensive operations to prevent casualties.¹⁸³ Such a negative military assessment was not totally surprising considering the abysmal progress of the Vietnam War in general by the 1970’s. After all, Kissinger was already speaking in the context of how best to disengage from Vietnam entirely, so

¹⁷⁹ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, Washington, undated, Republic of Korea Forces in Viet-nam (ROKFV), FRUS, Korea 1969-1976, Volume XIX, Part 1.

¹⁸⁰ Larsen and Collins, 153.

¹⁸¹ Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, Washington, June 26, 1971, FRUS, Korea 1969-1976, Volume XIX, Part 1.

¹⁸² Larsen and Collins, 152-153.

¹⁸³ Larsen and Collins, 151.

why should ROKFV be concerned with increasing their operational risk if the end appeared in sight?

On a deeper level, part of the answer related to national interests of two countries changing and falling out of alignment. From the USG side, the Nixon administration was openly pursuing a means to end the war and withdraw U.S. presence in Asia, especially after the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 (discussed in Chapter 4) which was unwelcome news to Park. This did not match ROKG interests, who sought to retain U.S. presence in Asia to ward off North Korea. Ending the war in an ambiguous defeat would also propose a challenge to ROKG national prestige, end their massive economic investments in Vietnam, and raised the question of U.S. abandonment in Korea. This misalignment of interests manifested in ROKFV's level of effort and paralleled the overall declining U.S./ROK relations. Regardless, the most damaging and egregious accusations towards ROKFV's conduct did not come from U.S. politicians or generals, but from the press and the Vietnamese populace.

ROKFV faced numerous allegations of civilian massacres and human rights abuses that damaged the memory of their service. The list included massacres at Ha My, Binh An, Vinh Xuan, An Linh, Phu Yen, and more. Investigator A. Terry Rambo interviewed South Vietnamese refugees in 1966 in which he discovered accusations of ROK soldiers murdering "hundreds" of South Vietnamese civilians. Allegedly, Koreans were "shooting people at random" and had "a deliberate systematic policy" of killing civilians.¹⁸⁴ In February 1968, Korean soldiers allegedly killed 135 civilians in a massacre at Ha My. According to a recent *New York Times* article, South Vietnamese

¹⁸⁴ Smith, Robert M. "Vietnam Killings Laid to Koreans," *The New York Times*, January 10, 1970.

residents still tell ghost stories about a South Korean soldier who haunts the village.¹⁸⁵ At Binh An, ROK soldiers allegedly massacred 1,004 civilians over a three-week period; Vietnam recently memorialized the event with South Korean representatives at a 50th anniversary in 2016.¹⁸⁶ South Vietnamese witnesses still living today attest to South Korean atrocities against women and children all over the ROKFV area of operations. One witness, Bui Thanh Tram said: “Meeting a Korean was like meeting death...they shot anyone they saw.”¹⁸⁷

These allegations could not possibly have been unknown to U.S. officials. During the negotiations of requesting subsequent ROK deployments, one State Department communication to Dean Rusk included the following critique of ROK forces as a disadvantage: “The style of ROK operations in Viet-Nam is such (i.e., virtually to take over the government of the areas in which they operate) that doubling the size of the ROK forces might have a significant adverse effect on Vietnamese attitudes.”¹⁸⁸ When investigator A. Terry Rambo briefed his findings of abuses to U.S. senior military officers, they responded with a gag order for him to “cease investigating the Koreans.”¹⁸⁹ Video footage from the U.S. Signal Corps (below), while certainly not showing any atrocities, does reveal that ROKFV unilaterally carried out their own prison operations,

¹⁸⁵ Kwon, Heonik. “Vietnam’s South Korean Ghosts,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2017.

¹⁸⁶ Park Ki-yong, “S. Koreans apologize on 50th anniversary of Vietnam War massacres,” *Hankyoreh*, March 12, 2016. http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/734593.html.

¹⁸⁷ Newsweek Staff, “Apocalypse Then,” *Newsweek*. April 9, 2000. <https://www.newsweek.com/apocalypse-then-157805>.

¹⁸⁸ Information Memorandum From the Chairman of the Korean Task Force (Brown) to Secretary of State Rusk, Washington, March 12, 1968. FRUS Korea 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1.

¹⁸⁹ Smith, Robert M. “Vietnam Killings Laid to Koreans,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 1970.

interrogations, and took women and children captive. ROKFV was at liberty to deal with prisoners however they saw fit.

Human rights abuse allegations left a lasting scar on the memory of the ROKFV's service. This alone may likely be a large factor for explaining why the modern-day memory of ROK participation in Vietnam is easily forgotten by the U.S. or ROK public at large, and why some may prefer it be forgotten. Sadly, these allegations also gave ROKFV another element in common with U.S. forces, who faced their own share of scandals and abuse allegations, most famously at My Lai. Ultimately, ROKFV followed U.S. guidance in controlling their area of operations and prosecuting a war where success was measured by a body count. The horrors of the Vietnam War led to devastation and lasting controversies that add to a tumultuous and conflicted memory, something South Koreans and Americans share.



(Top Left) Women's and children compound sign. (Top Right) Women and children in a prison compound. (Mid Left) The ROKA POW collection point, front entrance. (Mid Right) Vietnamese POW's. (Bottom Left) ROKA interrogating a prisoner. September 26, 1968. Source: Film Reel – ROK ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM (TIGER INFANTRY DIVISION), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32158>, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/32160> (accessed October 1, 2020).

Figure 13 - ROKA Prisoner Operations

A final assessment of the U.S./ROK military alliance leaves a mixed record, but ROKFV's contribution was militarily significant. ROKFV was not a mercenary force, nor was it a token force. The sheer fact that the Johnson administration was so keen to continuously request more and more ROK troops up until 1968 shows an implicit value in the ROK's presence. In the war's initial years, when national interests were most aligned, U.S. favorably praised ROKFV's contribution. This assessment declined overtime as the war stagnated, and national interests changed. Still, ROKFV remained in Vietnam until the war's end, finally withdrawing in 1973. The aftermath that immediately followed saw U.S./ROK relations decline to a new low, as the U.S. sought to reduce its presence in Asia and the ROKG became even more authoritarian in nature. The results left both countries eager to forget Vietnam ever happened.

Chapter 4: Aftermath and Memory

“At the Vietnam War, I joined as a soldier and came home as a mercenary.”¹⁹⁰

-Line from South Korean film *White Badge* (1992)

Ahmet Ozbuden, the Principal Secretary for the United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK), reflected on the news of the ROK's withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973. Ozbuden called the ROK's participation a “Democles [sic] Sword,” a reference to Cicero's legend of Dionysius and Damocles in which a sword hangs by a single strand of hair suspended from the ceiling.¹⁹¹ The parable's moral implied the shadow of impending doom hangs over those in positions of great power and fortune.¹⁹² This would become the fate of Park Chung Hee, who following Vietnam doubled down on his authoritarian dictatorship through his Yushin constitution and ultimately met his own untimely death.

USG and ROKG interests were mostly aligned during the Johnson administration, but they increasingly diverged after 1969. After Johnson, subsequent U.S. presidents from Nixon to Carter sought to withdraw U.S. troops from USFK and politically distance themselves from Park's ethically questionable human rights record. U.S./ROK relations declined sharply in the 1970's with both countries changing directions and questioning

¹⁹⁰ *White Badge*. Directed by Chung Ji-young. Chong Nam-gook, 1992. The quote is at (19:04) in which a literary publisher is recommending lines to the main character, Han-Kiju, for his upcoming book on Vietnam.

¹⁹¹ “Letter, Ahmet H. Ozbudun to C.V. Narasimhan, "Ramifications of the ROK Troop Withdrawal from Viet-Nam",” January 26, 1973, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, "International incidents and disputes - Korea - correspondence general (603.1)," Executive Office of the Secretary-General, S-0196-0008-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS), New York, NY. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117575>.

¹⁹² Evan Andrews, “What was the Sword of Damocles?” *History Stories*, February 17, 2016, <https://www.history.com/news/what-was-the-sword-of-damocles>, (accessed October 17, 2020).

their purpose in Vietnam. The downward slide left both countries eager to forget their eight-year military alliance.

Transitioning from the top-down approach of government perceptions, the end of the Vietnam War brought an embattled memory to both country's public memory on a more personal level. For the U.S., the story is well known as Americans had long since questioned and challenged their presence in Vietnam via a vigorous anti-war protest campaign. For South Korea, however, domestic opposition to Vietnam was largely silenced at the time. In the ROK, the use of the word "mercenary" could lead to one's arrest.¹⁹³ Yet, statistically, South Korea benefited enormously from their participation, although it came with the price tag of authoritarianism and political repression at home. Even after the war, the economic component remained a sticking point. Popular films show South Korea struggling to rationalize its economic benefits from such a seemingly regrettable war. The question of national interests, "Why are we in Vietnam?" became a difficult and uncomfortable question for both U.S. and ROK society and left the Korean contribution buried in popular memory.

After the War

The Vietnam War's aftermath changed USG strategic priorities and national interests. Historian Daniel Sargent argues that America's global presence in the 1970's transformed in a chaotic manner as it faced new challenges of détente, globalization, stagflation, and shifted the locus of U.S. military power out of Southeast Asia.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Blackburn, 65.

¹⁹⁴ Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), Kindle Edition. Introduction, Location 174.

Katharine Moon similarly argues that the Nixon Doctrine shocked the ROK, removed their leverage from Vietnam participation, and left the ROKG “grasping at straws” for national security.¹⁹⁵ Taking a starkly different stance from his predecessor, President Nixon and his chief advisor Henry Kissinger pursued *realpolitik* and disengagement from unnecessary commitments. Before the Vietnam War even concluded, the U.S. already began this process under the Nixon Doctrine in 1969.

If U.S./ROK relations were strained in 1968, the 1969 Nixon Doctrine took it down to yet another low. On July 24, 1969, Nixon declared the U.S. would begin withdrawing its military presence and commitments in Asia. Nixon told reporters in Guam: “Asians will say in every country that we visit that they do not want to be dictated to from the outside, Asia for the Asians. And that is what we want, and that is the role we should play. We should assist, but we should not dictate.”¹⁹⁶ Nixon planned to get the U.S. totally out of Vietnam and other regional entanglements in Asia, including Korea. In 1970, the U.S. withdrew the 7th Infantry Division (ID), over 20,000 soldiers, from the ROK. Nixon, and later Carter, slashed aid funding to the ROK from \$546.7 million in 1966-1971, to \$12.million in 1971-1978, and decreased the Military Assistance Program (MAP) down to nothing by 1978.¹⁹⁷ U.S. détente with the USSR and recognition of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1971 added to the ROKG’s concern of

¹⁹⁵ Katharine H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 60, 112-113.

¹⁹⁶ P.P. Richard Nixon, 1969, Doc. 279 – Informal Remarks in Guam With Newsmen, July 25, 1969, 279.

¹⁹⁷ Moon, *Sex Among Allies*, 57-59.

abandonment.¹⁹⁸ These moves towards disengagement occurred during the ROK military's redeployment from Vietnam.

The ROK military's homecoming occurred slowly and revealed that international opinion held a mostly negative view of the ROK's Vietnam participation. The first announcement of a "step by step" withdrawal came on January 14, 1971. In 1973, the final year of the war, there were still 38,000 ROK troops in Vietnam, outnumbering U.S. soldiers. UNCURK's commentary on the end of the ROK's role in Vietnam largely disapproved of the ROK's involvement. Zouheir Kuzbaria, secretary for UNCURK in 1970 stated that political observers in Korea, "who had always questioned the wisdom" of ROK involvement in Vietnam, applauded the decision to diffuse and end the Vietnam War.¹⁹⁹ His successor, Ahmet Ozbudun, agreed that the international community disapproved of the ROK's involvement, all be it with a more nuanced analysis. He stated that ROK troop removals "created mixed feelings in the Press." Ozbudun claimed "the over-all reaction favours the original 1965 decision to despatch [sic] the troops; praises the contribution of Korean soldiers to an invaded friend; welcomes generally the decision to withdraw; and expresses anxiety for the substantial economic loss that would be

¹⁹⁸ "Letters between Ahmet H. Ozbudun and C.V. Narasimhan," September 14, 1972, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, "International incidents and disputes - Korea – correspondence (603.1)," Executive Office of the Secretary-General, S-0196-0007-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS), New York, NY. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117609>.

¹⁹⁹ "Letter, UNCURK Principal Secretary Kuzbari to UN Chef de Cabinet Narasimhan, Withdrawal of ROK Troops from Vietnam," January 14, 1971, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, "International incidents and disputes - Korea - correspondence (603.1)," Executive Office of the Secretary-General, S-0196-0004-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS), New York, NY. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117451>.

inevitably incurred as a result of full withdrawal.”²⁰⁰ Other positive effects, the combat experience of the ROK veterans and their latest battle-tested equipment would aid the ROK’s military modernization and presumably increase deterrence against North Korea. By 1972, the remaining 38,000 troops planned to return home by December. Despite these silver linings, Ozbudun concluded: “The highly negative legacy of ROK forces in Viet-Nam thus appears to be coming to an end.”²⁰¹

UNCURK observers worried for the ROK’s future in the wake of Vietnam’s defeat. The redeployment coincided with a series of momentous challenges to the Park regime’s stability: the apparent failure of the war, U.S. removal of the 7th ID from Korea, and the PRC joining the UN. The loss of political leverage over the U.S. would leave the ROK more destabilized in at time of growing tensions with North Korea. Additionally, UNCURK was concerned about the economic loss that had boosted South Korea’s economy for eight years, as well as the absorption of the remaining 38,000 soldiers back into the economy all in the span of 60 days.²⁰² In a final analysis, Ozbuden alluded to international governments’ mixed feelings and embattled interpretations over South

²⁰⁰ “Letter, Ozbudun to Narasimhan, "ROK Troop Withdrawal from Viet-Nam"," November 10, 1971, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, "International incidents and disputes - Korea - correspondence (603.1)," Executive Office of the Secretary-General, S-0196-0005-04, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS), New York, NY. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117506>.

²⁰¹ “Letters between Ahmet H. Ozbudun and C.V. Narasimhan,” September 14, 1972, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, "International incidents and disputes - Korea – correspondence (603.1)," Executive Office of the Secretary-General, S-0196-0007-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS), New York, NY. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117609>.

²⁰² “Letter, Ahmet H. Ozbudun to C.V. Narasimhan, "Ramifications of the ROK Troop Withdrawal from Viet-Nam"," January 26, 1973, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, "International incidents and disputes - Korea - correspondence general (603.1)," Executive Office of the Secretary General, S-0196-0008-01, United Nations Archives and Records Management Section (UN ARMS),New York, NY. Obtained for NKIDP by Charles Kraus. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117575>.

Korea's participation in Vietnam. Ozbudun concluded that the withdrawal ended the "bad image intensely suffered by the ROK, even in the eyes of most friendly nations," and that their participation would "leave behind a residue of controversial legacy...in the form of bitter historic memory."²⁰³

In response to these rapid changes and uncertainties, Park clamped down on his own autocratic government in his declaration of the Yushin Constitution in 1972. Increasing North Korean aggression, the end of Vietnam, and withdrawal of U.S. troops from the ROK all influenced Park's decision. Park replaced South Korea's existing constitution, became de-facto President for life, and turned South Korea into a garrison state.²⁰⁴ The Yushin constitution exacerbated ROKG's most unethical elements, that which came with a terrorizing KCIA, media censorship, human rights abuses, and labor exploitation. The ROK's economic progress gained from Vietnam participation did not benefit everyone equally under the Yushin system.

Park played a very hands-on role in directing who would benefit most from Vietnam's economic opportunities. The largest beneficiaries were Park's state-supported *chaebols*, the massive Korean conglomerates that gained significant momentum during the war. Hanjin, receiving \$116 million dollars in contracts, got its start as a future master of containerized shipping.²⁰⁵ Vietnam accounted for 77% of Hyundai's profits from 1963-1966 through sub-contracts for military housing, the Pattani-Narathiwat Highway

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Hyug Baeg Im, "The Origins of the Yushin Regime: Machiavelli Unveiled," in *The Park Chung Hee Era*, Chapter 8, Kindle Edition, Location 3271.

²⁰⁵ Patrick Chung, "From Korea to Vietnam: Local Labor, Multinational Capital, and the Evolution of US Military Logistics, 1950-97," *Radical History Review*, issue 133 (January 2019): 31.

(in Thailand), and dredging Cam Ranh Bay.²⁰⁶ In accordance with Park's drive towards HCI (Heavy Chemical Industry), the ROK directed significant capital to creating Pohang Iron and Steel (POSCO) in 1968, and within 30 years POSCO would become the world's second largest steel producer.²⁰⁷ These companies persist to the present, and are often cited as the building blocks in South Korea's "miracle on the Han," although not without controversy.

The shining economic statistics belie an uglier side of Korean contract work in Vietnam. Outsourcing labor to foreign companies saved the U.S. from sending more Americans to an increasingly unpopular war, instead exposing foreigners to hazardous conditions. The USG cared little about obvious labor exploitation which was widespread amongst the contractors. This included oppressive schedules, dangerous conditions, and lack of benefits or overtime.²⁰⁸ These observations add to the appearance of South Korea making a dark bargain of blood for treasure, offering its young men as collateral for economic benefits.

It would be a mistake to assume the Vietnam War alone was responsible for South Korea's economic ascent in the 60's and 70's. The picture was far more complicated, and ridden with what Bruce Cumings called the "dark side" of the Park years.²⁰⁹ In recounting South Korea's economic rise, Cumings offers the following dirty laundry list: "...authoritarian constitutions, national police, registration of all citizens, meaningless

²⁰⁶ Glassman, 357-360.

²⁰⁷ Sang-young Rhyu and Seok-jin Lew, "Pohang Iron & Steel Company" in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, Chapter 11, Kindle Edition, Location 4563.

²⁰⁸ Chung, 40-43.

²⁰⁹ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 343.

elections, absence of civil and political rights, many secret police and intelligence groups, extremes of torture and thought reform for dissidents, close neighborhood surveillance by police and resident families.”²¹⁰ Vietnam War contracting was not the only controversial factor.

Chief among Park’s “dark side” was labor exploitation, especially women’s labor. Young women, primarily from ages 18-22, made up over 80% of South Korea’s textile workers, consisting of sewing, knitting, making footwear, packaging, and other tedious and mundane tasks. They worked in horrid conditions, had only one day off per month, and were paid the equivalent of the price of a cup of coffee per day.²¹¹ Additionally, large chaebols like Hyundai and Samsung banned labor unions. The Park regime under the Yushin system harshly and violently suppressed any attempts at speaking out against the abuses of industry.²¹² The exploitation of women’s labor was one factor among many of South Korea’s economic “take off.”

Park’s Yushin system enabled obvious human rights abuses towards the South Korean populace and further strained U.S./ROK relations during Jimmy Carter’s presidency. Carter, who prioritized human rights in his foreign policy, advocated for the complete removal of all U.S. troops in USFK. This initiative stalled, as even those in Carter’s own administration opposed it out of security concerns.²¹³ Despite Carter’s attempts to pressure Park into domestic reforms, the ROK was no longer dependent on

²¹⁰ Cumings, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American East Asian Relations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 89.

²¹¹ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 373-378.

²¹² Brazinsky, 225.

²¹³ Oberdorfer and Carlin, 72.

U.S. aid as in the decades prior and was more insulated to U.S. pressure. The ROK's economy tripled in size from 1965 to 1976, and for the first time had surpassed North Korea in GNP.²¹⁴ South Korea was now a rising power on the world stage.

Park's economic achievements combined with his authoritarian oppression to leave a mixed record in Korean memory. Despite Park's "dark side," many South Koreans still fondly remember Park as the ROK's greatest leader. He remains South Korea's most popular president, receiving over 70% approval rating in a 1994 poll.²¹⁵ A more recent 2015 poll still has Park in the number one spot, with 44% of South Koreans choosing him as the ROK's best president.²¹⁶ As time passed, more oppositional voices could finally speak out against the abuses of Park's regime and a younger generation could reevaluate his achievements in a new light. Still, others clung to the image of Park as a hero. Author Sang Hwa Hong highly praised the Park regime and the Vietnam decision for allowing South Korea to reach the "take-off" stage, reaching over 11% annual growth, even during the oppressive Yushin administration (1972-1979).²¹⁷ Any assessment of Park must give credit where credit is due regarding his economic achievements. Were these achievements worth the cost of Vietnam participation abroad and human rights abuses at home? How one answers that question determines their

²¹⁴ Oberdorfer and Carlin, 52, 77.

²¹⁵ Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 326.

²¹⁶ Korea Gallup Poll, "President of the Country", <http://news.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0923192136&code=11121100&cp=nv>, (accessed January 19, 2021).

²¹⁷ Sang Hwa Hong, *30/50 Club: A Dialogue on S. Korea, U.S., China, and N. Korea (For Truth, Empathy, and Future Harmony!)* (Korean Literature Inc., 2019), 35-45.

opinion of Park. Carter Eckert, a historian who lived in South Korea during the Yushin period, aptly reminds about Park: “to understand all is not necessarily to forgive all.”²¹⁸

Park died on October 26, 1979. His own director of the KCIA unexpectedly assassinated him during a dramatic private dinner. His “Damocles Sword” had finally fallen. His legacy, along with his decision to involve South Korea in the Vietnam War remained highly controversial and brought lasting effects. South Korea had finally surpassed North Korea, both economically and militarily. The ROK’s militarization and authoritarianism that solidified and accelerated during the war continued for another decade and leaves marks in the present. Notably, South Korea’s next two Presidents, Chun Do Hwan and Roe Tae Woo, were both Vietnam War veterans.²¹⁹

By the 1990’s, South Korea finally achieved a long-sought democratic government with legitimate elections and an opening up of political freedom and expression. With the passage of time, how would South Koreans look back and remember their country’s Vietnam experience? How would it compare to American memory? Their eight-year military alliance left many common themes in national memory representations, especially concerning the unethical elements of the war and struggles of returning veterans. However, the mercenary narrative remained a sticking point unique to Korean memory, while the American public forgot Koreans ever participated in Vietnam at all.

²¹⁸ Eckert, 7.

²¹⁹ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 390.

A Shared Experience: Popular Memory Through Film

Films are one way to gauge public memory of historical events. In the words of one scholar, they are “costume dramas” that reenact the past for the public’s examination and reflection.²²⁰ Films become historical sources themselves as “artifacts” for points in time that influence and reveal a national ideological debate in the making.²²¹ While they rarely depict reality with much accuracy, films do reveal how societies remember, process, and assimilate historical events into a national story. This is certainly the case in American cinema regarding the Vietnam War. Yet, American films do not include the slightest acknowledgment of a South Korean presence.²²² South Koreans are simply not part of the public American Vietnam War story. On the other side, South Korea now has a booming film industry of their own. A comparison of U.S. and South Korean films reveals that both countries depict shared themes and ideological debates regarding the war. These shared themes help to explain why South Koreans were left out of the American public imagination, and why it may be worth putting them back into the story.

American Vietnam War films broadly tell a story that begins in patriotism and ends in a debate between cynical skepticism versus a narrative of betrayal. One of the only films made during the war itself, John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* (1968) depicts an unabashed patriotism and pro-military stance that sought to garner public support of the

²²⁰ Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), Introduction, Kindle Edition Location 252.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, Preface, Kindle Edition Location 283.

²²² *Ibid.*, Appendix B, Kindle Location 5108. In a collection of 19 critical essays and an appendix including over 200 Vietnam War related films and documentaries, there is absolutely no mention of Korea or Koreans other than as a comparison of the Vietnam War to the Korean War or general facts regarding chronology of major events (e.g. *The Pueblo* incident). For this analysis, I personally watched ten of the most well-known U.S. films that depict the Vietnam War, and can attest that there is absolutely no acknowledgement of South Korean participation in any form. See bibliography for the full list.

war.²²³ After the war ended, movies struggled to reconcile America's defeat, the senselessness of the destruction, and the struggles of returning veterans to assimilate back into society. Acclaimed films like *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) depict the war as an unspeakable tragedy and descent into psychotic madness that permanently destroyed the lives of surviving veterans.²²⁴ By the 1980's, Vietnam movies approached a fork in the road. Some continued down a critical path of depicting a racist and imperialist U.S. with themes of human depravity that cast doubt on veterans' ethical conduct (*Platoon* 1986, *Full Metal Jacket* 1987).²²⁵ The other road followed a conservative Reagan administration in recasting the war as a narrative of betrayal. Betrayed by the anti-war protest movement and a weak government that withdrew commitment from the cause, American GI's were not allowed to win. This narrative is best depicted in the plight of American POW's (*The Hanoi Hilton* 1987) and the hyper-masculine *Rambo* franchise (*Rambo: First Blood Part II* 1985), where a neglected veteran redeems American masculinity by returning to Vietnam and freeing left-behind POW's.²²⁶

American films depict an ideological debate unfolding over four decades, and nowhere are Koreans present. Perhaps this should not be surprising, considering U.S. films frequently express racialized and ethnocentric depictions of a monolithic Asian

²²³ *The Green Berets*. Directed by John Wayne and Ray Kellogg. Batjac Productions, 1968.

²²⁴ *The Deer Hunter*. Directed by Michael Cimino. EMI, 1978. *Apocalypse Now*. Directed by Francis Coppola. Omni Zoetrope, 1979.

²²⁵ *Platoon*. Directed by Oliver Stone. Hemdale Film Corporation, 1986. *Full Metal Jacket*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Natant Harrier Films, 1987.

²²⁶ *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. Directed by George P. TriStar Pictures, 1985. *The Hanoi Hilton*. Directed by Lionel Chetwynd. Cannon Film Distributors, 1987.

enemy that leaves no room to distinguish a South Korean ally. Yet, the presence of Koreans could have helped either side of the debate, whether to add legitimacy to the war (a noble Korean ally joining a common cause) or adding to the cynicism of the conflict (Korean mercenaries present at the behest of an imperial U.S.). They have been left out of the story completely. Why is this, and how do Korean films compare?

South Korean memory of the Vietnam War remained highly repressed compared to the U.S. with far fewer films, novels, or other renditions made available to the public. This repression is due to the censorship of information under the Park and Chun governments, combined with the shame of the potential mercenary narrative and the war's failure.²²⁷ South Korean films depicting the war did not appear until the 1990's, and they are few in number, suggesting it is not a popular topic for the Korean public. Yet, notable films exist that mirror the same themes in U.S. movies. Based on a previously censored novel by Vietnam veteran Ahn Junghyo, *White Badge* (1992) centers on a veteran and journalist in 1979 South Korea coping with PTSD and writing a novel about his experience, and the film portrays the ROK military in a questionable light.²²⁸ In contrast, the horror film *R-Point* (2004) portrays a rugged ROKA platoon full of machismo and military glitz that may appeal to a young male audience.²²⁹ Alternatively, *Sunny* (2008) tells a romanticized story of Soon-yi, a singer in a musical act that entertains soldiers, who travels to Vietnam to reunite with her husband.²³⁰ The romance, *The Classic* (2003), uses the Vietnam War to add to the male protagonists' likeability,

²²⁷ Kwak Tae Yang, 260.

²²⁸ *White Badge*. Directed by Chung Ji-young. Chong Nam-gook, 1992.

²²⁹ *R-Point*. Directed by Kong Su-chang. Cinema Service, 2004.

²³⁰ *Sunny*. Directed by Lee Joon-ik. Jung Seung-hye, Cho Chul-hyun, 2008.

masculinity, and contributes to the romantic plot.²³¹ More recently, *Ode to my Father* (2014), in many respects a parallel to *Forest Gump* (1994), includes the Vietnam War as a pivotal moment in the protagonist's life, and by extension a key moment in the history of South Korea; it casts the ROKA in a sympathetic and favorable depiction.²³² These South Korean films offer a fruitful analysis of shared themes: rationalizing their country's purpose in Vietnam, questioning who the real enemy was, and understanding returning veterans' PTSD and assimilation back to normal life.

The first shared theme questions the conflict's larger purpose as an utterly senseless tragedy and focuses on human depravity, most recognizably captured in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* and Chung Ji-young's *White Badge*. *Platoon* depicts the most negative aspects of the war imaginable: blatant violence towards civilians, overt racism, attempted rape, torching a village, illicit drug use, infighting amongst GI's, intentional fratricide, and the abandonment of a U.S. soldier to die. The movie ends with no redeeming purpose to the struggle. *White Badge* depicts the ROK military experience in the same cynical nature. ROKA soldiers physically abuse Vietnamese civilians and torch their village. Later, when the unit mistakenly kills a group of Vietnamese civilians, a ROKA sergeant cuts off their ears and reports to his commander that they were Viet Cong. Afterwards, the same sergeant commits fratricide by killing the only ROK soldier who knows the truth (the same reasoning behind the fratricide in *Platoon*). The audience takes away a critical, at best ambivalent, view of soldiers' conduct in both films. One side of the memory for

²³¹ *The Classic*. Directed by Kwak Jae-yong. Egg Films, 2003.

²³² *Ode to my Father*. Directed by Yoon Je-kyoon. CJ Entertainment, 2014.

both countries remembers the war as a senseless and depraved struggle, leading both to regret and doubt their purpose in it.

The questioning of purpose in Vietnam is linked to a second shared theme of distinguishing the protagonist from the antagonist. Films make the audience question, “Who was the real enemy in the Vietnam War?” *Platoon*’s final line ends with the main character’s reflection: “I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves. The enemy was in us.” The comedic *Good Morning Vietnam* (1988) also ends with a disillusioned Adrian Cronauer doubting himself. In the climax, Cronauer confronts his Vietnamese best friend, (revealed to be a Viet Cong member) and screams: “I gave you my friendship and my trust, and now they tell me that my best friend is the god damn enemy!” Tuan responds: “Enemy? What is enemy?...You the enemy!”²³³ South Korean films express the same sentiment. *White Badge*’s main character Han, reflecting on his experience cynically thinks: “I didn’t defend Vietnam’s freedom or peace. I only defended my own pathetic life while getting more confused about human values and history.” In *R-Point* the ROKA platoon confronts the supernatural and results in killing each other, not Viet Cong. In an interview with the lead actor, Kam Woo-sung recalled “It’s [*R-Point*] not just a horror movie, it’s about the inner struggle” of soldiers.²³⁴ The nature of an ill-defined enemy constitutes a common thread in both U.S. and Korean popular memory and adds another cynical component that explains why both countries

²³³ *Good Morning Vietnam*. Directed by Barry Levinson. Touchstone Pictures, Silver Screen Partners III, 1988.

²³⁴ Interview with Kam Woo-sung, found in special features “The Making of R-Point” in the DVD. *R-Point*, 2004.

may prefer to forget their experience. With so much negativity, is there any reason worth remembering?

Negative interpretations are juxtaposed with more traditional, honorific films that focus on celebrating veterans' sacrifice for its own sake. This is best seen through the American *We Were Soldiers* (2002). Based on a memoir, the movie centers on Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore valiantly leading his unit against overwhelming odds, fighting a clearly defined enemy, and through epic combat scenes achieves a victory at great human cost. The film ends with Moore visiting the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. and rolls the names of the 7th CAV's casualty list in the credits. The audience's takeaway is one of patriotic sacrifice, that the veterans must be remembered for their contribution to America.²³⁵ Korean films show the same theme. Both *Sunny* and *The Classic* depict patriotic send-off ceremonies for the ROKA soldiers, complete with civilians waving national flags and cheering. Unlike *White Badge*, these films depict the ROKA in conventional military action, heroically facing a well-defined enemy in more stereotypical combat scenes that create empathy for the soldiers' service. These films are full of national pride that suggest a country's desire to honor its veterans, a topic leading to yet another shared theme.

Vietnam veterans' homecoming and struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is another highly visible shared memory. PTSD is central to the plot of *White Badge*. Han attempts to write a novel about the war but finds himself utterly unable to come to grips with his experience. An old army buddy, Private Byeon, also suffering from PTSD, reaches out to Han for desperate emotional support. *White Badge* gives a

²³⁵ *We Were Soldiers*. Directed by Randall Wallace. Icon Productions, Wheelhouse Entertainment, 2002.

direct nod to an American film when Byeon walks by a movie poster for *The Deer Hunter*, a U.S. film with parallel themes. Both *The Deer Hunter* and *White Badge* follow plot-lines where characters' relationships, jobs, and entire lives are completely ruined by their PTSD. Ultimately, *The Deer Hunter* tragically ends with a main character, still in Saigon, committing suicide via Russian roulette, while *White Badge* ends with Han mercifully killing Byeon in broad daylight (Byeon suffers a mental breakdown in public). *White Badge*'s final line is quite haunting, as Han thinks to himself: "He [Byeon] is still wondering in the jungle. I can't leave him wondering around anymore." Both films depict a gritty realism of veterans' lived experience and their inability to return to a normal life. They also empathetically express to the audience that society, American and Korean, may have an obligation to help these veterans and to remember what they went through.

While both U.S. and ROK films have shared themes, the mercenary narrative is an extra piece of baggage that the ROK alone struggles to reconcile. Unlike the American debate that obsesses over betrayal and "winning" or "losing" the war, the sticking point in Korean films is financial compensation. The combination of the financial motivations and benefits to Korea with that of the lived experience of war is an unresolved moral dilemma. *White Badge* has a scene where a Korean calls out a businessman, "Frankly you got rich thanks to the Vietnam War. While he [Han] was risking his life your family got rich on military supplies." The businessman replies, "What's wrong with that? We made money thanks to President Park. When President Park died, my Dad cried. I will splurge this dirty money." Lines in *White Badge* like "dirty money" and "came home as a mercenary" reflect this dilemma that Han's military service served no greater purpose than to enrich wealthy businessmen. In *Sunny*, the rock band expresses their motivation in

going to Vietnam purely to gain fortune and fame while entertaining soldiers. “Soldiers kill Viet Cong and we make money,” says one band member upon arrival. At one point, Viet Cong capture the band. Bandleader Kim Jeong-man asks his translator: “What is he [the Viet Cong leader] saying? Tell him we are here to make money.” Kim believes the distinction between entertainers making money, versus that of military personnel, will save him. The VC responds: “Korean Army has come to make money too.” By the end of *Sunny*, the band achieves their financial goal but decides to burn the money and focuses on a more noble goal instead (finding Soon-yi’s husband), thus ending the film with a more respectable motivation other than money. *Sunny* and *White Badge* directly acknowledge the mercenary narrative that challenges South Korea’s national interest as nothing more than financial profiteering. The mercenary label damages South Korean national pride and makes the Vietnam War a shameful memory.

In addition to the mercenary narrative, Korean films also depict an awareness and resentment of American racism towards Asians, another sticking point in the shared memory. While Americans do not depict Koreans in their films, the Koreans often portray Americans negatively. In *R-Point*, ROKA soldiers refer to Americans as “Yankee assholes”; there is certainly no love lost between these allies. *Ode to my Father* depicts a Korean excited about entering a bar (possibly a brothel) in Vietnam, but the main character doubts that Americans would let him inside, possibly because of his race. In *Sunny*, U.S. soldiers first rescue Soon-yi and her band from the VC, but then almost kill the band, despite exclamations of “I’m Korean!” The scene signals to the audience that American GI’s cannot tell the difference between Vietnamese and Koreans. Furthermore, when Soon-yi performs in front of American troops, the GI’s demean her through sexual

objectification, treating her like a stripper. Comparatively, Soon-yi's performances are still sexually provocative when done in front of ROKA troops; however, these scenes are jovial celebrations that feature traditional Korean songs. This further suggest a racial element in that it is acceptable for Soon-yi to be sexualized in front of Koreans but unacceptable in front of Americans, whose intentions are portrayed maliciously.²³⁶

Could ethnocentrism and racism alone explain why Americans do not remember Korea's role in Vietnam? Broadly speaking, American racism towards Asians during the period is a well-known and studied theme, characterized by the harshly derogatory "gook syndrome."²³⁷ Yet, racism alone is unlikely to explain the absence. American films certainly do not shy away from depicting racism towards the Vietnamese. Racism is readily on display in most U.S. films such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Good Morning Vietnam*, always directed towards dehumanizing Vietnamese, and forces audiences to confront the uncomfortable reality of the period.

Additionally, even in movies that strive to avoid racist depictions, Koreans are still absent. In *We Were Soldiers*, LTC Moore addresses his unit, saying: "Look around you, in the 7th Cavalry, we got a Captain from Ukraine, another from Puerto Rico. We got Japanese, Chinese, Blacks, Hispanics, Cherokee Indians, Jews, Gentiles, all American." In Moore's speech of racial and ethnic solidarity, South Korean allies did not make the cut. Perhaps there were no Koreans in the 7th CAV, or Moore was unaware of the

²³⁶ Soon-yi's performances are more explicitly sexual in front of American audiences, and Soon-yi is visibly uncomfortable singing American songs like "Suzy-Q." Although the sexual element is still present, she is seen totally at ease in front of Korean audiences when singing Korean folk songs in scenes that take place outside with a summer block party atmosphere. In contrast, her performances in front of Americans take on the atmosphere of a strip club with dark, indoor settings.

²³⁷ Simeon Man, *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 141.

ROKA's presence in Vietnam in 1965. Yet, *We Were Soldiers* does make two references to Korea in the film; the fact that LTC Moore was a Korean War Veteran himself, and a quick aside where Moore complains to a superior about the larger geo-political situation: "Korea didn't teach them [U.S. politicians] anything." These references indicate Moore was likely aware of Korea's relevance to U.S. Cold War politics; yet ROKA soldiers in Vietnam are never mentioned. While racism is no doubt an added component to the conflict over Vietnam's memory, the fact that a film went out of its way to avoid racist depictions, but still did not mention Koreans, suggests the lapse in memory is deeper still.

Returning to the main question, why doesn't U.S. public memory recall Koreans in Vietnam and why does it matter? Certainly, the mercenary narrative, racism, and commercial interests of the film industry are possible explanations. However, I propose the root answer may be the question of national interests, a topic that neither U.S. nor ROK films confront. U.S. Vietnam War films are consistently portrayals from the bottom up, centering on individual experiences as observers to larger geo-political events well beyond one's knowledge or control. The core question of "Why are we in Vietnam?" is not debated and is quickly passed off to an impersonal government's machinations.²³⁸ In one scholar's words, the war was just "something that happened, rather than something that was done."²³⁹ The top-down approach is not present. American films are afraid to seriously address the question "Why are we in Vietnam?" because the answer is too frightening, damaging, and divisive to the American public. Afraid to answer this

²³⁸ In both *The Green Berets* and *The Hanoi Hilton* military officers directly answer this question (when asked by reporters) by referring them to the civilian authorities. The military is portrayed as acting out lawful orders without questioning their purpose.

²³⁹ Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, Introduction, Kindle Edition, Location 171, 290.

question, Americans cannot possibly add another wrinkle of “Why are Koreans in Vietnam with us?” ROK national interests are another matter entirely, perhaps even more confounding for the American public to contemplate.

An analytical comparison of U.S. and Korean film representations of the Vietnam War must conclude the two countries shared an experience, evidenced by so many of the same shared themes and ideological debates. Ultimately, including Koreans in the Vietnam War story is a matter of setting the record straight. They were there, and they contributed considerably. This is a continuation of America’s shared history with South Korea going back to 1945 and needs to be acknowledged. The Vietnam War, for all its faults and turbulence, was an important steppingstone on the ROK’s journey towards becoming a world power. The U.S. was integral to the process by bringing the ROK to war with them, and therefore shares degrees of both blame and credit for the impacts on the ROK domestically.

Conclusion

The mercenary narrative is an oversimplification of the ROK's participation in Vietnam and masks a larger story of national interests. South Korea did not join the war purely out of U.S. pressure. Park Chung Hee, as part of his national vision for the country's future, seized an opportunity to increase his own political stability, national defense, and economic development. South Korea had a national interest in prosecuting the Vietnam War as it was linked to their own military conflict against a belligerent North Korea. The South Korean military, despite controversy, made a sizable qualitative and quantitative contribution to the U.S. effort in Vietnam, one far beyond a token presence. Due to the tumultuous aftermath of the war and the staying presence of the mercenary narrative, the memory of the ROK's participation in Vietnam has been left in the dust bin of history.

Reclaiming this memory is important to American and South Korean history for three major reasons. First, restoring the memory is vital to honoring the sacrifice of U.S. and ROK veterans for its own sake. Secondly, the Vietnam War is crucial to understanding the ROK's economic ascent, one which the U.S. facilitated by legitimizing Park and came at a human cost. Lastly, the partnership demonstrated that military alliances hinge on the degree of shared national interests between governments, a topic of vital relevance to today's geo-politics.

To the first point, appreciating the ROK soldiers' sacrifice in Vietnam is a worthy cause in itself that benefits contemporary U.S./ROK relations. The current ROK ambassador to the U.S., Soo Hyuck Lee, stated the alliance between the two countries is "deeply embedded" through an "alliance bought in blood," referring to the Korean War.

He elaborated further with the metaphor of the U.S./ROK alliance as a tree, with the military as the tree's roots, economic cooperation as the branches, and cultural elements as the flowers and leaves.²⁴⁰ Vietnam was a continuation of this partnership. Yet the ROK veterans have been shortchanged by both U.S. memory and ROKG actions. Due to ROKG censorship and concerns over public appearances, ROK veterans have suffered several injustices. These included an initial exclusion from the Agent Orange class action settlement (at ROKG's insistence), a refusal to accept soldiers' remains from the Vietnamese government (ROKG insisted there were none), and a continuing debate over the exact casualty, MIA, and POW figures.²⁴¹

At least one example of honoring ROK veterans can be found in the U.S. The Korean American Veterans of the Vietnam War (KAVV) is specifically dedicated to this purpose. The organization recognizes Korean Americans (serving in the U.S. armed forces) combined with that of ROK soldiers who fought in Vietnam, some of whom are now U.S. citizens. According to KAVV, about 3,000 Korean veterans of Vietnam reside in the U.S. today. The organization's current mission is to assist aging veterans and their widows gain access to quality care and assistance to gain U.S. citizenship and voting rights. The organization proudly declares that Korean veterans "supported the cause of freedom at the request of the United States."²⁴² Unsurprisingly, the word "mercenary" is nowhere found on their website, nor any mention of economic benefits to the ROK. Here is a case of Korean veterans honoring their service with appeals to patriotism.

²⁴⁰ Soo Hyuck Lee, "Korea Policy Forum with Ambassador Soo Hyuck Lee", presentation for the George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies, September 3, 2020.

²⁴¹ Kwak Tae Yang, 265-266. As of 2006, a settlement was finally reached for Dow Chemical and Monsanto to pay \$63 million to 6,795 Korean veterans.

²⁴² Korean American Veterans of the Vietnam War, <https://www.kavvw.org/>.

When it comes to comrades in arms, political motivations matter little when lives are in danger. The mercenary narrative may be appealing to critics seeking to question the USG or ROKG's politics, but the label loses rhetorical power when applied to ROK soldiers on an individual level. Even Robert Blackburn, himself a Vietnam veteran, while still denouncing "More Flags" as hiring mercenaries, placed this heartfelt afterword to his monograph:

During almost two years of duty in Vietnam, this author had the good fortune to fight alongside, though never with, some units of the ROK Marines, and was never bothered by what label they wore. For mercenaries or no, these men, and their Filipino and Thai counterparts, shared the same dangers, the same hardships, and the same fears as any American there. These Korean, Filipino, and Thai soldiers were simply brave soldiers serving their country because their country's leaders said they had to, and 5,241 of them died following these orders. There is no rancor nor reproach felt here toward the honorable services of these brave men.²⁴³

U.S. and ROK soldiers may not have always been physically shoulder to shoulder, but they were both in the same country fighting for the same side. They were both there, fighting together. The shared experience matters.

Secondly, the Vietnam War had a dramatic impact on the ROK's history, and the USG may not have been fully cognizant of its role in facilitating the change. By the end of the war, South Korea overtook North Korea economically and militarily for the first time. The ROK transitioned from an impoverished agrarian nation, dependent on U.S. handouts, into a rising power on the world stage, fully integrated into the U.S. Military Industrial Complex and no longer in need of financial aid. Chaebols like Hanjin and Hyundai that benefited so tremendously from the business of war are still the heavy-weight titans of South Korean industry today. Combined with these positive impacts,

²⁴³ Blackburn, 155.

there was also the “dark side” of Park’s authoritarianism, human rights abuses, and labor exploitation, all of which the U.S. implicitly facilitated through supporting Park.

Park’s actions set South Korea on a trajectory of continuing militarization and statism for two decades. Even after Park’s assassination, Chun Do Hwan, a regimental commander in the Vietnam War, continued the legacy of a military dictator. He seized power in a coup just as Park did, and continued highly controversial and authoritarian policies, most famously at the 1980 “Kwangju Massacre” where ROK soldiers killed hundreds of South Korean civilians protesting Chun’s coup.²⁴⁴ To the resentment of the ROK public and political opposition, the U.S. again took a “wait and see approach,” just as they had with Park, and accepted and legitimized Chun.

How aware was the U.S. of this dark side of these domestic impacts? From the USG standpoint, it likely mattered little as long as the ROK offset North Korea and fulfilled its Cold War purpose. Concerning U.S. relations with South Korea, Bruce Cumings critically commented: “This people [South Korea] deserves better from its own leadership, and it deserves better than it has gotten from the United States that has been deeply involved in the lives of Koreans for half a century, but knows them not.”²⁴⁵ Understanding how the U.S. war effort in Vietnam dramatically affected South Korea is necessary for the U.S. to acknowledge its role in South Korea’s trajectory, both the good and the bad.

Lastly, South Korea’s contribution to Vietnam was a significant case study for the utilization of alliances in the modern world. Contemporary U.S. military alliances often

²⁴⁴ Oberdorfer and Carlin, 95, 102.

²⁴⁵ Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, 513.

devolve into the derided “coalition of the willing,” full of token and tentative presences that make little to no military impact.²⁴⁶ The ROKA in Vietnam was just the opposite. It is doubtful that foreign observers expected the ROK to be capable of deploying a Corps sized element, 50,000 soldiers, outside of its own borders, but they did. ROKFV’s presence was militarily significant, earned the praise and accolades of the highest-ranking U.S. commanders, and proved the ROK as a potent and capable military power.

The ROK’s military capability is highly relevant to contemporary geo-politics in a changing world. North Korea remains a top adversary of both the U.S. and ROK. The U.S. and China’s strategic rivalry poses considerable uncertainties to the world’s future. In facing these strategic challenges, the ROK remains a vital and essential partner to the U.S., one that should never be taken for granted. The military alliance between the U.S. and the South Korea now spans seven decades and multiple wars, continuing into the present. South Korea supplied the second the greatest number of allied troops to the Iraq War to aid their ally once again.

The U.S./ROK partnership during Vietnam demonstrated that military alliances are based on shared national interests, more so than mutual values. In future conflicts, the U.S. will need allies again. The USG must remember that the extent of meaningful allied contributions is linked to the degree to which their national interests align. In the case of the Vietnam War, the ROKG’s national interests – political, national defense, economic -

²⁴⁶ “Coalition of the Willing” refers to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 which struggled to maintain international support. See for example: United States Congress Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight. Economic And Military Support for the U.S. Efforts In Iraq: the Coalition of the Willing, Then And Now: Hearing Before the Subcommittee On International Organizations, Human Rights, And Oversight of the Committee On Foreign Affairs*, House of Representatives, One Hundred Tenth Congress, First Session, May 9, 2007. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2007, 1-2.

aligned in such a way that the Republic of Korea willingly became an effective American ally, even in what proved to be a losing cause. For better or worse, the Vietnam War was a shared story for both countries.

Appendices

Appendix A

U.S. Allied Troop Contributions to the Vietnam War	
Country	Peak Number Troop Contribution
South Korea	50,003
Thailand	11,586
Australia	7,672
The Philippines	2,061
New Zealand	552

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Appendix B

South Korean Deployments to Vietnam	
Date	Deployment
September 1964	First Mobile Surgical Hospital (MASH) and Taekwondo Instructors
March 1965	Dove Corps – Engineering Brigade and Logistical Support
October 1965	First Combat Deployment – Capital Division (Tiger Corps), Second Marine Regiment (Blue Dragon Corps)
September 1966	Second Combat Deployment -Capital Division (26 th , 28 th , 29 th , 13 th Regiments) and Ninth Division (White Horse)
August 1967	Additional Marine Brigade
Planned for 1968	Cancelled by the ROKG

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²⁴⁷ Blackburn, 158.

²⁴⁸ Park, 265.

Appendix C

The “Brown Memorandum” – U.S. Concessions for the Second ROK Combat Deployment	
1	Equip/Finance all additional costs of additional ROK forces deployed to RVN
2	Pay Overseas Allowances to all new forces (30 times the rate ROK forces in Korea receive, and four times that of RVN troops)
3	Death, wounded, and disability gratuities at double the rate originally agreed upon
4	Equip, train, finance complete replacement of the additional forces deployed to RVN
5	Provide communications facilities for exclusive ROK use; provide 4 C-54 aircraft to ROKAF
6	Provide over the next few years substantial...modernization of ROK forces in Korea
7	Provide improvement of ROK barracks and sanitation facilities
8	Provide improvement to ROK anti-infiltration capability, following completion of joint study
9	Provide equipment to expand ROK arsenal for increased ammunition production
10	Avoid new economic burdens for Korea, release additional won to the Korean budget equal to all of the net costs of the deployment...
11	Suspend MAP Transfer Program as long as there are ROK forces (2 divisions) in RVN...review Off-shore procurement in Korea with a further determination in FY68
12	Procure in Korea supplies, services, equipment for ROK forces in RVN and to direct to Korea selected types of procurement for U.S. and RVN forces...
13	Procure in Korea...as much as Korea can provide in time and at a reasonable price, a substantial amount of goods being purchased by AID for use in its project program for rural construction, pacification, relief, logistics, and so forth, in RVN
14	Provide Korean contractors expanded opportunities to participate in construction projects in RVN
15	Increase technical assistance to ROK in general field of export promotion
16	Provide AID loans over and above the \$150 million figure agreed in May 1965
17	Provide \$15 million of program loans in 1966 which can be used for exports to RVN

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²⁴⁹ Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, January 27, 1966, FRUS Korea 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1. The actual list contains even more wording for each individual item.

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