

Viewing Seoul from Saigon: Withdrawal from the Vietnam War and the Yushin Regime

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The withdrawal of Korean troops from Vietnam remains an understudied period in modern Korean history as it remains situated in the background of other seismic events in US-ROK relations including the declaration of the Nixon Doctrine, the withdrawal of 20,000 troops from the Korean Peninsula in 1970, and Kissinger and Nixon's historic visits to China to usher in the era of détente, events which many scholars argue heightened security concerns in Korea and contributed to the calculations in Park Chung Hee's establishment of the Yushin regime. This study seeks to understand how the withdrawal process from Vietnam affected US-ROK relations and the domestic political scene in Korea and understand how this process, in addition to the other significant events of the period, contributed to Park's decision to turn to an authoritarian style of government. It is argued that the true downward turn in US-ROK relations can be found within discussions on troops in Vietnam, and that unilateral planning, coercive diplomacy, and the use of Korean troops in the Vietnamization process to cover the US withdrawal all negatively impacted US-ROK relations and pushed Park Chung Hee to declare independence from US influence.

Keywords: Yushin, Vietnam War, US-ROK relations, Park Chung Hee, Nixon Doctrine

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I. Introduction

The establishment of the Yushin regime on October 17, 1972 in the Republic of Korea (ROK · Korea) by Park Chung Hee is a very significant event in Korean history. It marked the end of Korea's democratic experiment and signified the beginning of a hard authoritarian period that would last until the people uprooted the Chun Doo Hwan government in 1987. During this fifteen-year period the people of Korea would simultaneously witness the rapid development of their economy and suffer violations of their human rights. Dissidents were jailed, protests were dispersed with tear gas and force, and the people were mobilized to support a regime over which there was little to zero oversight. Despite nearly a decade of elections and at least the appearance of a democratic form of government between 1963 and 1972, what were Park Chung Hee's reasons for installing himself as *de facto* president?

Past studies addressing this question have provided a variety of answers. One possibility is Park Chung Hee's desire to strike out on an economic modernization program through establishing heavy chemical

industries, which was announced shortly after the Yushin declaration in January 1973.¹ A second possible answer is Park Chung Hee's political insecurity after facing a near loss in the 1971 presidential election against Kim Dae Jung.² Others have emphasized the leadership capabilities of Park Chung Hee during the establishment of the Yushin regime.³ Still other scholars have also insisted the impact of the North Korea threat, the reason Park Chung Hee himself cited for the Yushin regime, was important.⁴

While not necessarily arguing against these domestic or intra-peninsular factors, others emphasize the changing international environment in the early 1970s. Here scholars argue that US President Richard Nixon's Guam Doctrine (now more commonly known as the Nixon Doctrine) created a more unstable security environment for Korea and other US allies in Asia. For example, Tae Gyun Park argues that the new grand strategy of the US signaled the "Koreanization" of the Korea problem, or that Korea was now responsible for its own security.⁵ Park argues that Park Chung Hee thus commenced on a plan, the Yushin reforms, that would rapidly mobilize South Korean society to meet this new challenge. Seuk-ryule Hong also emphasizes the influence of the Nixon administration's grand strategy and links Nixon's pursuit of détente with the establishment of the Yushin regime. Hong argues that the *realpolitik* policy of the Nixon administration led it to care little about

¹ See Jung-en Woo and Hyeong-A Kim.

² Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005): 366.

³ For an example of a decidedly positive assessment of Park Chung Hee and his leadership abilities see Kim and Sorensen. HyugBaeg Im's chapter in *The Park Chung Hee Era: the Transformation of South Korea* emphasizes Park Chung Hee's ability to control several of the factors stated here to his advantage while establishing the Yushin regime.

⁴ See Jong-Dae Shin and Sang-yoon Ma.

⁵ Tae Gyun Park, *An Ally and Empire: Two Myths of South Korea-United States Relations, 1945-1980* (Seongnam: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2012): 306.

the nature of the Korean political system as it did not affect US national interests. Bruce Cumings summarizes these arguments by saying that “If Richard Nixon was declaring his independence of America’s Cold War commitments in the region, Park [Chung Hee] would declare Korean independence in politics, economics — and national security.”⁶

This study seeks to add to this body of research on the impact of changing international politics on Park Chung Hee’s decision to implement the Yushin regime. As stated above, scholars have looked toward the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, the withdraw of some 20,000 US troops from the Korean Peninsula, and the US-China détente as the major factors that heightened the security concerns of Park Chung Hee and influenced his transition away from democracy. However, these studies largely ignore the most important aspect of the Nixon administration’s Asia policy: the Vietnam War.

Studies on the Korean role in the Vietnam War do exist, yet most focus on the deployment of Korean troops to Vietnam and how the Vietnam War affected ROK-US relations during the 1960s.⁷ Others have offered assessments of whether or not the Korean troops in Vietnam should be classified as mercenaries, while other studies have sought to tally up the funds provided to Korea by the US government through agreements reached on troop deployments and understand how the war contributed to Korea’s rapid economic development.⁸ But there is a noticeable lack of scholarship on the withdrawal of Korean troops from Vietnam and how this process impacted US-ROK relations and the domestic situation in Korea.

⁶ Cumings, *Korea’s Place*, 364.

⁷ See Hyun Dong Kim and KyuDok Hong.

⁸ See Frank Baldwin, Richard Blackburn, and Nicholas Sarantakes for discussions on whether Korean troops in Vietnam should be classified as mercenaries or not. See Tae-Yang Kwak and Tae Gyun Park (2015) for a discussion on the financial impact of the Vietnam War on Korean economic development.

The withdrawal process of Korean troops from Vietnam deserves attention for two key reasons. First, during the final full year of the war, 1972, the number of Korean troops in Vietnam was larger than the number of American soldiers and significantly more Korean troops died in the final year of the war. How did this situation come about and what are the ramifications of this unbalanced withdrawal process on US-ROK relations and the domestic Korean political scene? Second, the Vietnam War is a constant throughout the entire period of the first Nixon administration during which so many changes took place in international politics, changes which are said to have affected Park Chung Hee's calculations on whether or not to implement the Yushin regime. What impact did the events in Vietnam have on these changes in international politics and Park Chung Hee's decision to initiate the Yushin regime?

This study seeks to answer these two questions and understand how the US policy in Vietnam affected its Korea policy. It will be argued that Korea became a tool of American foreign policy in Asia and this lack of recognition the US government of how its policies were affecting the ROK lead to an increased threat perception in Seoul. This contributed to Park Chung Hee calculating that not only was the Yushin regime perhaps necessary, but that he could implement it with little resistance from Washington. The following section discusses the existing explanations for the heightened security concerns of Park Chung Hee which influenced his decision to move toward authoritarianism and their shortcomings. The third, fourth, and fifth sections discuss how the withdrawal process from Vietnam affected Park Chung Hee's calculations to carry out his authoritarian plans, and the final section provides a conclusion bringing together all elements presented in this study and others and suggests areas that need further research.

II. Nixon's Grand Strategy Loses Sight of the Details

As mentioned above, the existing arguments on how US-ROK relations

and changes in international politics increased the security concerns of Park Chung Hee largely center on events after 1969 and the administration of Richard Nixon. Nixon won the presidential election of 1968 by promising an “honorable” conclusion to the Vietnam War. However, his grand plan also included the downsizing of direct American involvement in all of Asia and would later seek to decrease security threats in the Asia-Pacific by capitalizing on the Sino-Soviet split and engaging China, ushering in the era of détente. The first part of this grand strategy was announced on July 15, 1969 in what was at first known as the Guam Doctrine and has since been known as the Nixon Doctrine. Nixon argued that “Asian hands must shape the Asian future,” and that the role of the US would become one of assistance rather than prescription.⁹ Such statements were obviously quite shocking to the Korean government which was heavily reliant on US security guarantees to prevent another North Korean invasion and on US aid for boosting its economic development. Nixon tried to ease Park Chung Hee’s fears of abandonment when they met following the Nixon Doctrine announcement on August 21, 1969 in San Francisco, California and contended that South Korea was an exception to this new policy.¹⁰ However, the Korean government would soon learn this was far from the truth and that not only would the Nixon Doctrine apply to Korea, but also that it would become an import cog in its implementation.

Despite his promise to Park Chung Hee during their summit and previous promises by the Johnson administration not to reduce the number of US troops in Korea while Korean troops were in Vietnam,¹¹ in

⁹ *Public Papers of the President of the United States of America: Richard Nixon, Containing the Public Messages Speeches and Statements of the President* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1975).

¹⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, May 17, 1965, FRUS 1964-1968 Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea, 48(2000) pg. 97-99.

¹¹ Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, September 19, 1967, Top Secret, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea, 129(2000), pg. 278-282.

November 1969 Nixon ordered a plan which would “cut the number of Americans there [Korea] in half” be immediately drawn up and “sold to the Koreans on a proper basis.”¹² The plan was shared with the Korean government in the spring of 1970 and signalled to the Korean government that not only were they not an exception to America’s new Asian policy, but that the US was also going to unilaterally enact their Korea policy without first consulting Seoul. Unilateral action would become the norm under the Nixon administration as Park Chung Hee and his administration were blindsided again in July 1971 when the US and China made joint announcements in connection with Henry Kissinger’s secret visit to Beijing. Foreign Minister Kim Yong-sik was forced to inquire about whether or not any secret deals were made concerning the Korean Peninsula following this historic and secret meeting in the fall of 1971.¹³

Many authors correctly point out that this series of events led the Park Chung Hee administration to suffer from fears of US abandonment. While the US compensated the withdrawal of troops from South Korea with a lucrative military modernization program, advanced weaponry was a poor substitute for a large American presence and the danger of further or even a complete withdrawal of US troops from Korea was a constant worry for the Korean government after the Nixon administration demonstrated that it was willing to break promises regarding troop withdrawals. The US move to secretly engage China heightened these abandonment fears as now Korea’s main ally was negotiating with a hostile power that had fought against South Korea in the Korean War a mere twenty years earlier. In addition to these external security threats,

¹² Memorandum from the President Nixon to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), November 24, 1969, Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 45(2010) pg. 117.

¹³ Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, September 23, 1971, Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 109(2010) pg. 279-280.

Park Chung Hee was also likely feeling internal pressure from the weakening of the Cold War structure given anti-communism rhetoric was the foundation of his government, thus contributing to the need for an authoritarian system to protect his grip on power.¹⁴ These worries of US abandonment and the end of the Cold War would prove to be overstated as no further troop withdrawals were made, US-China détente never threatened the security of South Korea, and détente did not bring about the end of the Cold War, yet at the time these fears were likely real and potent.

However, the Nixon Doctrine, US troop withdrawal, and the US approach to China were not the only causes of heightened security threat perceptions in Korea. And indeed it could be argued that the Nixon Doctrine did its best to relieve Korean fears of abandonment after each of these episodes. The announcement of the Nixon Doctrine was followed by the summit between President Nixon and President Park. The withdrawal of American troops from the Korean Peninsula was compensated by an expensive and extensive military modernization program.¹⁵ The moves to open up an era of détente were accompanied by several assurances from the Nixon administration to the Korean government that indeed no secret deals were being struck regarding the Korean Peninsula between the US and China.¹⁶ Yet these episodes were

¹⁴ Kim Jung-bae, “Miguk, Yusin, Geurigo Naengjeoncheje [The US, Yushin, and the Cold War],” *Miguksayeon-gu* [The Korean Journal of American History] 38 (2013): 151-190.

¹⁵ National Security Decision Memorandum 48, which finalized the decision to withdraw 20,000 American troops from Korea, ordered that Military Assistance Program (MAP) appropriations of 200 million USD per year be provided to Korea from 1971 to 1975 and PL-480 economic assistance would be provided at or above 50 million USD a year between the same years. A series of intense bargaining sessions then began over the contents of the military modernization program, and although President Park certainly was worried about the political fallout of the US withdrawals, he did not seem disappointed by the size of the military assistance as he reportedly smiled at plans drawn up by the US government. Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, August 4, 1970, Secret, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 5(2010), pg. 175-180.

¹⁶ For example, reassurances were provided by both Secretary of Defense Rogers and Henry

not the only major events to take place in US-ROK relations during this period, and in fact these moves were results of the foundational issue in US foreign policy at the time: the Vietnam War. Korea was also a major contributor to the Vietnam War in terms of manpower and the issue of dispatching troops to Vietnam had been the cornerstone of improved US-ROK relations in the early and mid 1960s. So to truly understand changes in US-ROK relations during this time, and indeed changes in international politics during this period of history, we must consider the Vietnam War. Below it will be argued that the four following Vietnam War related factors negatively impacted US-ROK relations and heightened the security concerns of Park Chung Hee and the Korean government during the late 1960s and early 1970s leading up to the implementation of the Yushin regime: negative changes to US-ROK relations predate the Nixon administration and are related to security concerns related to the Vietnam War, the unilateral decision-making process as it related to Korea during the Nixon administration went beyond the withdrawal of American troops from Korea and its China policy and was a constant during planning regarding the Vietnam War, the US implemented a coercive strategy to obtain Korean compliance with its unilateral plans regarding the Vietnam war, and the US blatantly used Korean troops to cover its own withdrawal from Vietnam.

III. Johnson Administration Sets the Stage

Many accounts on the changes in US-ROK relations begin with the election of Richard Nixon or discuss events that took place during his

Kissinger to ROK Foreign Minister Yong-sik Kim in September 1971 between Kissinger's visit to China in July 1971 and Nixon's historic visit in February 1972. See Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, September 23, 1971, Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 109(2010): 279-28; and Memorandum of Conversation, September 28, 1971, Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 110(2010): 281-285.

presidency. However, the shift actually began as Nixon was still campaigning to become president in 1968 during the final year of Lyndon B. Johnson's time in the White House. Yet, to how drastic of the change in tone of the relationship was we must start with the high point in the Johnson administration. The timeline begins with the ascension of Lyndon B. Johnson to the presidency following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. Johnson almost immediately announced an increase in America's commitment to protecting South Vietnam from the communists in North Vietnam and, in an effort to gain international support for US operations in Vietnam, started "The Free World Assistance Program."¹⁷ This program, which later became known as the "More Flags" program, found a willing partner in Park Chung Hee and South Korea as Korea had been offering to send troops to Indo-China since the French were embattled in their former colony under the Syngman Rhee administration.¹⁸ It is likely this willingness to become involved in Vietnam stemmed from a learning effect by the Korean government and people as it witnessed Japan's economic development take-off through procurement contracts related to supporting the UN forces during the Korean War.¹⁹

Korea's first deployment to Vietnam was approved by the National Assembly on July 31, 1964 and consisted of non-combat personnel per the US request. In February 1965, the so-called "Dove Unit" of some 2,000 men, mostly army engineers, arrived in Vietnam. A few short months later, Johnson broached the subject of Korean combat troops in Vietnam during Park Chung Hee's state visit to Washington D.C. The first deployment of combat troops including the Capitol Division,

¹⁷ Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1994)

¹⁸ Memorandum by the Executive Secretary (Lay) to the National Security Council, March 2, 1954, FRUS 1952-1954, Volume XV, Part 2, Korea, 875(1984): 1754-1755

¹⁹ Park, *An Ally and Empire*, 255.

regarded as South Korea's best-trained troops, and a marine brigade known as the Blue Dragon Corps was approved by the National Assembly on August 15, 1965. Negotiations for a second division began in January 1966 and the deployment of the White Horse Division was approved by the National Assembly on March 30, 1966. As mentioned in the introduction, many scholars have criticized these troop deployments as the contracting of mercenaries given the economic nature of the negotiations surrounding the deployment of Korean troops. In particular, the so-called Brown Memorandum, which was drafted during the negotiations over the deployment of the second South Korean army division in early 1966, included a laundry list of military and economic benefits for Korea including: equipping the Korean soldiers serving both in Korea and in Vietnam with modern weapons, financing the deployment, salaries, death and disability benefits of the Korean troops dispatched to Vietnam at double the amount previously agreed upon during the deployment of the first combat troops, continuing the suspension of MAP transfers, extremely favourable access to US and South Vietnamese military procurement contracts for Korean firms along exclusive access (outside of US suppliers) to procurement contracts for the Agency of International Development (AID) projects carried out in South Vietnam, increased technical assistance, and increased amounts of AID loans to Korea.²⁰

These negotiations and the cooperation on troop deployments in exchange for economic benefits marked a high point in US-ROK relations. One prominent example of these heights can be found in Vice President Hubert Humphrey's statement on February 23, 1966: "As long as there is one American soldier on the line of the border, the demarcation line, the whole and entire power of the United States of

²⁰ *United States Agreements and Commitments Abroad*, US Congress, Senate Hearings (1970): 1549-1550.

America is committed to the security and defense of Korea. Korea today is as strong as the United States and Korea put together.” Humphrey’s statement was so strong that it became a topic of the Symington Subcommittee Hearings in February 1970 that were investigating US commitments abroad, and in relation to the ROK-US relationship, levied statements accusing the Koreans in Vietnam as serving as American mercenaries.²¹ However, Park Chung Hee and the ROK government quickly learned that the ROK was of secondary concern compared to other strategic US interests.

This fact was realized during the increasing security tensions on the Korean Peninsula in the late 1960s when the number of military incidents along the DMZ increased dramatically. General Charles H. Bonesteel, Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, Korea and Commander of United States Forces, Korea, issued a disturbing report on the upsurge in incidents along the demilitarized zone on July 26, 1967.²² The US did not wish to see these skirmishes escalate into a full-scale war and a second front in Asia. However, they were disturbed by Park Chung Hee’s reaction to the situation as he insisted on retaliating against any North Korean violations of the armistice. Despite US desires that the US and Korea work together to resolve the security crisis in a controlled manner, William J. Porter, the American ambassador to the ROK at the time, felt that Park Chung Hee was putting “the US on notice that northward actions by ROK personnel will continue at a greater pace and with greater vigour than in the past, with or without US cooperation.”²³

²¹ Tae Young Kwak, “The Anvil of War: The Legacies of Korean Participation in the Vietnam War” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2006): 133.

²² In 1965 and 1966 there were a total of roughly 80 such incidents, but in the first half of 1967 alone there were over 280 clashes according to the report. Telegram from the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, Korea and the Commander of United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp), July 21, 1967, Secret, attachment to Memorandum from Alfred Jenkins of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow), July, 26, 1967, Secret, FRUS, 1964-1968, 123(2000): 261-266.

This growing rift between the US and ROK widened following North Korea's most aggressive armistice violations in January 1968 which consisted of the North Korean raid on the Blue House and the capture of the USS Pueblo. A standoff ensued in which Park Chung Hee, outraged by the North Korean attempt to take his life, aggressively sought to convince the US to strike North while Ambassador Porter and General Bonesteel struggled to convince Park Chung Hee to refrain from any sort of unilateral retaliation against North Korea as the ROK president became increasingly irrational.²⁴ Seeking to gain the upper-hand, Park Chung Hee threatened to withdraw Korean troops from Vietnam the hope of forcing the US to strike North Korea. This plan backfired. President Johnson sent his close confidant Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance to Korea in February 1968 to end this Korean rebellion against US policy. Vance met with Prime Minister Chung Il Kwon and Presidential Secretary Yi Hu Rak and made it quite clear that the US would not permit any unilateral South Korean military action against North Korea nor would it allow the Korean government to entertain the possibility of withdrawing from Vietnam. Porter gave quite a vivid description of the exchange in a telegram to the State Department.

When Chung stated that National Assembly pressure might force his government to withdraw their troops from Vietnam, Vance told him flatly we would reciprocate by withdrawing our troops from Korea. He [Prime Minister Chung] gasped, sputtered and immediately went out and brought Yi Hu-rak into the meeting. Vance also made it quite clear to the

²³ Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, September 19, 1967, Top Secret, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea, 129(2000), pg. 278-282.

²⁴ Cyrus Vance described Park Chung Hee to President Johnson in February 1968 as "moody, volatile" and noted that "he has been drinking heavily." He also relayed stories about Park Chung Hee hitting his wife with an ash tray. Notes of the President's Meeting with Cyrus R. Vance, February 15, 1968, Top Secret, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea, 180(2000): 376-383.

Prime Minister that, if we fail to reach agreement on the issues before us, there would be serious US domestic reactions in respect to Korea.²⁵

Vance's statements had the intended effect. A few weeks later, on March 8, 1968, Prime Minister Chung presented an unprecedented plan of potentially sending an additional two divisions to Vietnam.²⁶ The ROK would not address the subject of troop withdraws from Vietnam again until 1971, well into the Nixon administration and well after the US had begun withdrawing its own troops.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the events above. First, US-ROK relations had soured significantly by the time Nixon took office in 1969 thus signifying the need to look beyond the three events described above for the foundational concern that underscores all three of the announcement of the Nixon doctrine, the US troop withdrawal, and détente with China. The second conclusion is that the foundational concern is clearly the Vietnam War as it had forced the US to whitewash over grave provocations by North Korea in early 1968 while denying Park Chung Hee the chance to retaliate for the attempt against his life. The Vietnam War was not only holding captive some of Korea's best fighting men, but it had also hijacked US policy on Korea. All policy decisions regarding Seoul were now being made through the prism of their impact on Saigon and thus indirectly on Washington given the growing gravity of the war. This trend of disregarding the impact of policy on Korea manifested during the Johnson administration and would continue on during the Nixon administration.

²⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, February 14, 1968, Secret, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea, 179(2000): 375-376.

²⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, March 8, 1968, Secret, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea, 186(2000): 402-404.

IV. Unilateral Planning Cuts Korea Out of the Loop

A common theme emerged in the Nixon administration and it can be seen in the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea, and Kissinger's China visit. Planning for all three events was carried out without consulting with Seoul and ended up shocking Park Chung Hee and his administration. While there is no doubt that these events were each significant in their own right and led the Korean government to gradually distrust the Nixon administration, each event was accompanied by actions from the US government to smooth things over as mentioned above. Yet this common theme also manifested itself in the planning of the Vietnam War, and time and time again there was no effort by the Nixon administration to include Korea in the planning process.

As described above, the Johnson administration had sent a jolt through the Korean government which had sufficiently dissuaded them from seeking rapid withdrawal of their troops stationed in Vietnam. This move had such a lasting effect that as American troops began withdrawing in 1969 under the Nixon administration, the Korean government hardly broached the subject of withdrawing their troops at all despite the fact that unilateral acts such as the withdrawal of US troops from Korea were potentially threatening ROK security. One early inquiry on the subject was made by Prime Minister Chong Il Kwon who assumed in a conversation in April 1969 with now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Brown that the withdrawal of forces from Vietnam would take place on "some sort of a pro rata basis among the allies."²⁷ However, no follow-up regarding this assumption was ever made and US troop withdrawals commenced after Nixon's announcement on August 31, 1969.²⁷

²⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, April 2, 1969, Secret, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XIX, Part 1

The Korean government finally advised the US government of its withdrawal strategy and submitted a proposal to the US government in April 1971 suggesting that they would begin withdrawing some troops in October of the same year. Specifically, the ROK sought to withdraw its marine brigade and leave its two army divisions in place, a plan that was eventually put in motion later that year. However, when considering how to respond to this proposal, the US government continued to decide matters related to Korea policy unilaterally. US officials assumed that the Koreans were interested in staying in Vietnam as long as possible to continue to accrue the economic benefits related with their troop deployments to Vietnam as outlined in the Brown Memorandum.²⁸ A few months after receiving the Korean proposal in June 1971 National Security Decision Memorandum 113 (NSDM 113) was issued which stated that while the US would support two Korean divisions in Vietnam, it would not condone increased costs for support arrangements, the US would seek improved performance from ROK units in Vietnam, and ROK forces in Vietnam had no relationship with US troop levels in South Korea.²⁹ A similar conclusion would be reached the following year and expressed in the form of NSDM 161 after a Korean proposal in early 1972 to continue withdrawing troops from Vietnam beginning in May 1972.³⁰ The unilateral scheming by the US was successful in retaining Korean troops all the way through the signing of the peace agreement in Paris in January 1973 following which Korean troops were hastily withdrawn to comply with the agreement.

It is likely that the assessment of Korea's interests was correct, and

Korea, 1969-1972, 5(2010): 11-15.

²⁸ Report by John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff, April 16, 1971 FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 90(2010): 230-236.

²⁹ National Security Decision Memorandum 113, June 23, 1971, Top Secret FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 96(2010): 247-248.

³⁰ National Security Decision Memorandum 161, April 5, 1972, Top Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 132(2010): 328-329.

some scholars argue that the reason Korean troops remained in Vietnam so long was precisely for the economic benefits.³¹ Yet, if the US government concluded that Korean and American interests were in alignment at this point, why did they not seek to include the Korean government in discussions about its troop withdrawal schedule? Just as during the Johnson administration, Korea policy was again beholden to the needs of Vietnam and the US. John Holdridge, a career diplomat with extensive experience in East Asia who served on Nixon's National Security Council, mentioned in a memo on April 16, 1971 after the ROK government first suggested to begin withdrawing troops that the domestic political situation was partially motivating their proposal given that other troop contributing countries had begun withdrawing their forces.³² However in the subsequent State Department study on the withdrawal of Korean troops from Vietnam and NSDM 113, the Korean position was not considered at all and conclusions were instead based on the needs of Vietnam and plans already drawn up for US troop withdrawals.³³ Thus we can see that the unilateral planning was not an oversight on the part of the US but a chosen strategy to ensure that decisions were made based solely on US interests.

V. Coercively Persuading the Willing?

Further demonstrating the lack of interest in considering Korean national interests while making foreign policy decisions or while planning strategies in Vietnam was the coercive nature of the American rhetoric to

³¹ Tae Gyun Park, *Beteunam, Jeonjaeng: Ithyeojin, Jeonjaeng, Banjjogui Giyeok [Vietnam War: the Forgotten War, Half-True Memories]* (Seoul: Hangyoreochulpan, 2015).

³² Report by John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff, April 16, 1971 FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 90(2010): 230-236.

³³ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, undated, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 90(2010): 243-247; National Security Decision Memorandum 113, June 23, 1971, Top Secret FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 96(2010): 247-248.

gain Korean compliance with US policy. The US also embarked on an oddly extreme campaign to convince the Korean government not to withdraw from Vietnam too quickly despite internal conclusions that Korea would not want to forego the economic benefits provided in return for leaving their troops in Vietnam. For example, although NSDM 113 reflected the Korean government's April 1971 proposal and officials in Washington assumed Park Chung Hee and the ROK government preferred to leave its troops in Vietnam to reap the economic gains, when Defense Secretary Melvin Laird visited Korea soon after NSDM 113 was issued, he seemed to passive-aggressively threaten President Park against further troop withdrawals from Vietnam.

I expressed the hope that President Pak would apply sound logic in considering any future withdrawal of ROK forces, i.e., linking ROK troop presence to the capability of the RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam, Armed Forces] to perform the tasks now being done by the ROKs. I cautioned President Pak about linking ROK presence in South Vietnam to that of the US or any other third nation. I observed that if the US had followed such a pattern in his nation (Republic of Korea), the US would long ago have withdrawn from Pak's country. I suggested that Pak should gauge ROK troop pressure in RVN against mutual ROK/RVN interests.³⁴

Not only does Laird's statement ring of a personal resentment against continued US troop presence in Korea, but it implies that Laird may have envisioned a scenario in which Korean forces would remain in Vietnam despite the withdrawal of all US forces. Furthermore, it is unclear why such a threat was warranted as during the same visit Laird notes that the

³⁴ Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, July 19, 1971, Top Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 101(2010): 254-263.

ROK Minister of Defense Jung Rae-Hyeok told Laird that plans to only withdraw the ROK marine brigade in Vietnam consisting of only 10,000 men beginning in December of 1971 which is a policy consistent with the US's desired goal, adding that future withdrawals, while being planned, had no set date.

The plan described above by Defense Minister Jung was indeed the course of action taken by the ROK as Laird later reports on August 11.³⁵ However, the US government remained wary that domestic forces in Korea calling for withdrawal from Vietnam would convince the ROK government to pursue further withdrawals in 1972 which was in contradiction to the desires of NSDM 113.³⁶ These rumors led to a new round of US arm-twisting. When President Park's Special Assistant Hahn Pyong-choon visited Washington in early September 1971, General Haig, who served as Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, attempted to persuade Hahn, who admittedly was advising President Park to withdraw from Vietnam, to instead advocate for a continued presence in Vietnam. Haig was also not shy about unleashing veiled threats and told Hahn that, "South Korea should plan on leaving its forces there for at least the coming year. Withdrawing precipitously would raise the same danger of instability in Indochina that Mr. Hahn wanted so much to avoid in the Korean peninsula."³⁷ Although NSDM 113 instructed that Korean troops in Vietnam should not be linked to US troops in Korea, for the second time a US official had covertly linked the withdrawal of Korean troops to unfavorable consequences for Korea in terms of US commitments to protect and

³⁵ Footnote 3 on page 270. Memorandum from K. Wayne Smith and John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), September 1, 1971, Top Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 105(2010): 270-271.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, September 1, 1971, Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 106(2010): 272-277.

maintain troops on the peninsula. Haig did not stop here however and went on to question Korea's commitment to the Nixon Doctrine should it withdraw from Vietnam to hastily saying, "If South Korea precipitously pulls its forces out, thereby undercutting the Nixon Doctrine's reliance on Asian nations' defending themselves, this action would bring even greater criticism on South Korea." Haig's statement here perverts the Nixon Doctrine into claiming that Korea has the responsibility to defend fellow Asian nations, likely contributing to rumors in Seoul that the Vietnam War would turn into a Korea-led operation.³⁸

This coercive campaign of persuasion initiated by the Nixon administration on the ROK government demonstrates just how out of touch the US was with understanding Korean national interests. In the first example, Secretary Laird is convincing the already convinced Park Chung Hee to do what he has already decided to do in leaving two army divisions in Vietnam while withdrawing a single marine division. A month later General Haig is suggesting that Korea has some responsibility for the defense of all of Asia thus insinuating that Korea was positioned to cover the US retreat from the region, a suggestion that paints the Nixon Doctrine in a new light for the leaders of Korea. The US had now demonstrated that it was willing to unilaterally plan its foreign policy goals in Asia without the input of its ally and was willing to push the ROK to follow those plans regardless of whether or not those policies had a positive impact on the ROK or not.

VI. Covering the American Retreat

However, these American strategies for how to implement its foreign policy had real-world consequences and impacted Korea in a very unfortunate manner. The clearest impact of the unilateral US planning

³⁸ Ibid.

that resulted in a delayed withdrawal of Korean troops from Vietnam was the increased death toll of Korean soldiers in the final years of the war compared to the number of US battle deaths. The number of Americans killed in action in 1968 stood at an overwhelming 14,561 while the number of Koreans who died that year was 663. However, by 1972, the number of Americans killed in Vietnam had dropped dramatically to 132 soldiers killed in action while the number of Korean deaths was 380.³⁹ This striking flip in the number of US soldiers killed and the number of Korean battle deaths was a direct result of the manner in which the withdrawal process took place. The Nixon administration's "Vietnamization" process was a policy for the training and modernizing of the Vietnamese armed forces so that they could take over the responsibility of protecting South Vietnam. This would allow the US to withdraw its forces and end its combat mission in Southeast Asia. Nixon was elected on the promise that he would end the Vietnam War and pulling American troops out of Vietnam became one of his most urgent tasks.

Korean troops were to serve a crucial role in this process. The Korean marine brigade that was withdrawn first was stationed in MR-1, a region that was an early target of Vietnamization. The withdrawal of the Korean marines which commenced in December 1971 coincided with the withdrawal of virtually all foreign troops from MR-1 which concluded in March 1972.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the US would seek to keep the two Korean army divisions in Vietnam throughout 1972 and into 1973 as Vietnamization was progressing slower in the regions in which they were stationed. For example, the White Horse division was deployed in MR-2

³⁹ Yeong-ho Ch'oe, *BeteunamjeonjaenggwaHanguk-gun* [The Vietnam War and the Korean Army] (Seoul: Gukbangbu Gunsapyeonchanyeonguso [Ministry of Defense, Institute for Military History], 2004), 905.

⁴⁰ Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 230

which was a region in which Vietnamization was particularly slow, yet still a target for the early extraction of US forces. This need was directly pointed out by the State Department study on options for Korean troop withdrawal in the summer of 1971.⁴¹

The purpose their extended deployment in Vietnam does not seem to have been lost on the ROK government and military commanders either. As the war lagged on into 1972 as the diplomats at the peace talks in Paris failed to reach a suitable agreement, the US had to begin demanding that Korean units move out from their bases to engage the enemy in the central highlands of MR-2.⁴² In addition to being left to fight the Vietnam War increasingly on their own, withdrawal pace of the US troops compared to Korean troops was so unbalanced that in 1972 the US government had begun to ponder leaving additional US personnel in Vietnam just to handle the logistical needs of the ROK forces since the size of the US forces in Vietnam had decreased to such a small number.⁴³ And just months before the peace agreement to end hostilities in Vietnam was reached, the US government was considering strategies to convince the ROK government to leave a division in Vietnam into 1974 as it was argued that Vietnamese troops could still not assume the role of securing the areas in which Korean troops were deployed.⁴⁴

The use of Korean troops in the Vietnamization process clearly signaled to the ROK government that its troops had become a pawn in US foreign policy. It was evident that the impact of decisions on Korea

⁴¹ Paper Prepared in the Department of State, undated, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 90(2010): 243-247.

⁴² Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, April 26, 1972, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 128(2010): 336-339.

⁴³ Memorandum from the Chairman of the National Security Council Under Secretaries Committee (Irwin) to President Nixon, March 21, 1972, Top Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 128(2010): 321-322.

⁴⁴ Memorandum from the Chairman of the National Security Council Under Secretaries Committee (Irwin) to President Nixon, October 5, 1972, Top Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 128(2010): 405-407.

was at best a secondary concern in the minds of US policymakers. This was apparent not only in the manner in which the US went about making decisions through unilateral planning and coercive persuasion, but also in the outcomes of the policies which provided nothing in terms of political benefits to Park Chung Hee and his administration and merely supplied Korea with money for modernization and weapons to protect itself as the US withdrew from the region. The Nixon administration calculated that if enough material incentives were provided that the Korean government would acquiesce to their decisions. This proved true, to a certain degree. Park Chung Hee relied on the US for the materials to modernize his country, but it had become clear that little attention was being given to the political future of his country or the details of Korea policy. This consistent neglect by US policymakers over the final years of the Vietnam War produced an environment that encouraged Park Chung Hee to seize the initiative and declare the Yushin regime.

The Vietnam War would not end up lasting long enough to truly know if the US was willing to let the Korean army assume an even greater load in fighting the war. Yet it did last long enough to affect Seoul's security calculations. The unilateral planning by Washington was yet another example of how Park Chung Hee could never be sure where US foreign policy was headed and whether the US was truly a reliable ally or not. The Nixon administration's needlessly coercive negotiation tactics only further corroded ROK-US relations. And perhaps most importantly the lack of information sharing on the progress of the Vietnam War left Seoul worried that it would soon take over responsibility for fighting alongside the South Vietnamese without US troops by its side.

VII. Consequences of the Nixon Administration's Actions

Ambassador Philip Habib, who had taken over the post of US

ambassador to the ROK in mid-1971, sounded the alarm in May 1972. He reported to his superiors that, “Generally speaking, we are seeing a rising trend of Korean concern that the U.S. takes them for granted and that we also are less than prepared to share in advance those discussions of strategy and actions which we are pursuing in regard to matters directly affecting Korea’s forces and Korea’s future, both military and political.”⁴⁵ Habib also specifically mentions that ROK government officials are disappointed with the lack recognition Korea is receiving for its efforts in Vietnam and also upset at the lack of information they receive regarding the progress of the Vietnam War. Therefore there must have been some small sense of satisfaction for Park Chung Hee and his close aides when Habib was summoned on October 16, 1972 to be informed that martial law would be declared the following day in what would become known as the beginning of the Yushin era.

Returning to the two questions proposed in the introduction, it is clear that the late withdrawal of Korean troops and the unbalanced pace of withdrawal between the US and Korea was the result of US government policy in order to support the Vietnamization process while simultaneously covering its own rapid withdrawal from the war. Furthermore this unbalanced withdrawal process put a severe strain on US-ROK relations and the domestic political scene in Korea. Habib’s memorandum shows how the ROK government began feeling taken advantage of and dissent against Korea’s involvement in the Vietnam War grew louder as the US withdrawal hastened. The negative aspects of the withdrawal process including the unilateral planning, coercive diplomacy, and use of Korean troops in the Vietnamization process also likely factored into Park Chung Hee’s calculations to implement the

⁴⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, May 19, 1972, Secret, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 141(2010): 350-351.

Yushin Regime. Initially, Park Chung Hee had planned to mention US policy and its role in heightening the security concerns of Korea during his announcement of the Yushin regime, but tough diplomacy by the US kept the harshest critiques out of the statement. While numerous events occurred during the first three years of the Nixon administration that the statement could have been referring to, it is likely a cumulative effect of all the events mentioned here including the Nixon Doctrine, the withdrawal of US troops from the ROK, Nixon's visit to China, and the Vietnam War. Discounting any of these events is unwise, but considering the impact of the Vietnam War is crucial to have a complete picture of how US-ROK relations developed during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the lead up to the declaration of the Yushin regime. While other landmark events stick out on timelines, the frustrating day to day grind of the Vietnam War and the consistent lack of information and the steadily building burden on the Korean forces as the US troops withdrew would have had a significant cumulative effect on Korean officials. This point is summed up well in Habib's memorandum sent on May 19, 1972.

Soon after securing his political future through the referendum on his new Yushin constitution, Park Chung Hee instructed his Defense Minister Yu Chae Hung to inform Habib of the ROK government's decision to begin withdrawing its troops on January 2, 1973 with the process to be completed by the end of June that year.⁴⁶ At this point in mid-December 1972, the US was still heavily bombing North Vietnam in hopes of persuading them to sign the peace accords, yet this was far from certain at the time. Although Park Chung Hee's revolt against US policy amounted to very little given that the Paris Peace accords were signed a month later, it provides a window into his mind. US policy had been ignoring Korea for years and Park Chung Hee wished to declare

⁴⁶ Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, December 16, 1972, FRUS 1969-1976 Volume XIX, Part 1 Korea, 1969-1972, 141(2010): 446-447.

independence from the unilateral actions of the US. The Vietnam War played a major role in convincing Park that the US did not have his country's best interests at heart as US national interests and domestic politics demanded that US policymakers prioritize Saigon over Seoul. This prioritizing led the US to engage in unilateral planning that was coercively imposed on the ROK government regardless of whether or not the devised plans matched Korean national interests. These unilaterally devised plans resulted in Korean troops being used to cover the US retreat and assist in the Vietnamization process in the final years of the war. While not discounting domestic factors which also likely factored into Park Chung Hee's calculations to establish the Yushin regime, the Vietnam War clearly influenced the equation as Park sought a more stable and insulated authoritarian government from both domestic and international actors.

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