Myopia in Korea: The U.S.-South Korea Alliance and the Relationship Between Lyndon Johnson and Park Chung-hee, 1963-1969

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Introduction

The United States' relationship with the Republic of Korea (hereafter referred to as South Korea) since the latter's founding in 1948 has generally been characterized by amity and cooperation. Common action on prerogatives related to economic development, military security, diplomacy, and mutual cultural affinity has underpinned the perception that the two countries and their leaders have tended to move in lockstep with each other. However, the history of the U.S.-South Korea alliance has encountered periods of significant tension and even hostility, as the two countries and their leaders have oscillated between sharing overwhelming mutual interests and bickering over dramatically different concerns at many points over the past several decades. Perhaps no time in the alliance's history saw more volatility than the period between 1963 and 1969, which corresponded with the presidency of Lyndon Johnson in the U.S. and the majority of the first decade of Park Chung-hee's leadership of South Korea. Major developments on the Korean peninsula and elsewhere, including ongoing tensions between North and South Korea, Park's zealous economic development initiatives, Seoul's normalization of diplomatic relations with Tokyo, the Vietnam War, and the security crisis of 1968 served as major inflection points defining the nature of the relationship between the U.S. and South Korea as well as that between Johnson and Park. This paper seeks to analyze how the relationship between Lyndon Johnson and Park Chung-hee

was influenced by the state of the U.S.-South Korea alliance, with key developments such as the normalization of relations between South Korea and Japan, the deployment of South Korean troops to Vietnam, and the fallout from the Blue House raid and capture of the U.S.S. *Pueblo* examined as inflection points impacting the correspondence between the two men and, in turn, the two nations.

Two Towering Enigmas

Before assessing the context of the alliance between the U.S. and South Korea in the 1960s and the events that so profoundly affected it, it is critical to understand the characteristics of the two men whose leadership had significant effects on the political, economic, and social evolution of both countries. Reflections on the Johnson administration tend to understate the seminal role played by the thirty-sixth U.S. President's distinctive personal characteristics in shaping his policy decisions and relationships with politicians both at home in the U.S. and abroad, in part because, as acknowledged by many biographers, Johnson's personality was so idiosyncratic that it is nigh impossible to assess succinctly.[1] Similarly, many analyses of South Korea under Park's rule tend to focus on the economic phenomena that underpinned the so-called "Miracle on the Han River" during the 1960s through a lens of developmental state theory, downplaying or altogether ignoring the historical factors at play in the country as well as the influence of Park's personality, leadership style, and individual motivations on the Third Republic of Korea and its politics.[2]

In Johnson's case, his upbringing and path to assuming the presidency at the age of fifty-five after more than three decades' experience in Washington had an enormous bearing on his personal and political disposition. Lyndon Johnson was born in 1908 in the small Texas Hill Country town of Stonewall, located roughly fifty miles west of the state capital of Austin, and primarily raised in nearby Johnson City. His life was atypical from the start: his father, Sam Johnson, was an experienced state legislator who championed the interests of impoverished farmers but spurned many of the racist stances taken by his colleagues and refused

1 Mark K. Updegrove, *Indomitable Will: LBJ in the Presidency* (New York: Skyhorse, 2014), 9–13.

2 Byung-Kook Kim, "Introduction: The Case for Political History," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 26.

to be bought by lobbyists and powerful businessmen. Lyndon, though intrigued by his father's profession and profoundly influenced by the elder Johnson's faith in government as an altruistic representative of the common man, nonetheless grew resentful of his father and the life the Johnson family lived as his ambitions grew. Rather than attending college as his parents had desired, Lyndon fled the poverty and ennui that had afflicted him in his hometown for California, but a lack of opportunity saw him return to Texas and enroll in college within a year.[3] Although Lyndon Johnson worked tirelessly from a young age to escape the Hill Country and the harsh lifestyle it imposed on its inhabitants, the material conditions of his birthplace and relationship with his family left an imprint on his personality and political philosophy that remained with him for his entire life. The hardscrabble poverty that afflicted the small communities of Stonewall and Johnson City, the lack of opportunity brought about by the region's poor soil and lacking infrastructure, and the ceaseless confidence Sam Johnson had in government to address the struggles of ordinary people in underserved locales like those of the Hill Country undoubtedly influenced Lyndon Johnson's hard-nosed, gritty sense of determination, fierce aversion to failure, and view of government as a force for good.

In addition to solidifying his persistent character and staunchly liberal ideals, Lyndon Johnson's journey to the Oval Office shaped his pragmatism and refined his skills as a legislator and negotiator. Johnson first began working on Capitol Hill in 1931 as an assistant to Representative Richard M. Kleberg, a nonchalant politician who delegated most of his responsibilities to his staffers. Johnson, a man enchanted by Washington and enthralled by the opportunity he saw to escape from the austere existence of life in Texas,[4] was a relentless force on the Hill and beyond, especially after fellow liberal Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President in 1933. Johnson worked tiringly long shifts, built an enormous network of bureaucrats and elected officials, and developed a close relationship with many of the most influential men in Washington; he worked his way up political ladders, endearing himself to figures like Representative Sam Rayburn before gaining the attention and respect of Roosevelt. After earning himself a stint as the Texas state

3 Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 6-8.

4 Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 156-157.

director of the National Youth Administration, Johnson was elected a congressman in his own right in 1937 in Texas's 10th House district, home to much of his native Hill Country.[5] Eleven years later, he won a fiercely contested Senate election against then-Texas Governor Coke Stevenson under controversial circumstances, setting the stage for his ascension to one of the most powerful positions in the Democratic Party.

Johnson's steady rise to the upper echelons of Congress and ultimately the vice presidency saw him become a master of the legislative process, most notably vote-counting and securing widespread support from his colleagues.[6] Johnson additionally walked a political tightrope between representing Texas and its interests and seeking a position as a national leader within the Democratic caucus and the Senate as a whole, which ingrained in him a shrewd pragmatism that stuck with him for the remainder of his political career. He remained a Southerner in many ways even as he became the Democrats' vice presidential nominee in the 1960 presidential election, retaining a sense of enmity toward coastal elites and clashing with Robert F. Kennedy as he courted support from his home state and other parts of the South to help the Democratic ticket to victory in a close contest. As Vice President, Johnson remained true to his primordial characteristics, many of which would go on to define his presidency: he acted on his concerns for the least fortunate Americans, particularly on civil rights issues, and he remained partial to addressing domestic policy issues that most tangibly affected the slice of the country he most resonated with and wished to serve.

Meanwhile, Park Chung-hee was born in 1917 in Kumi, a rural town north of Taegu in a southeastern region of the Korean peninsula known as Kyŏngsang. At the time, Korea was a Japanese colony; Tokyo's rule of the country was characterized by draconian repression of the Korean language and culture as well as the forceful exploitation of land and labor, galvanizing pro-independence, anti-colonial, and nationalist sentiment, but Korea also experienced industrialization and considerable economic growth, leading to considerable collaboration between some pro-Japanese Koreans and colonial authorities. Park, who was raised in an impoverished farming family, was a taciturn but ingenious, ambitious, and vain individual who detested growing up in an impoverished, backwater part of Korea; much like Johnson, he was desperate to escape

5 Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, 16-19.

6 Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, 150-153.

his hometown for greener pastures.[7] While Johnson's path to power began in legislative work, Park found a place in the military, joining the Manchukuo Imperial Army in 1940. His talents were quickly recognized by his Japanese superiors, and he was admitted to the Japanese Military Academy in Tokyo, where he graduated in 1944. After Korea was liberated from Japanese rule the following year, he entered what later became the Korea Military Academy, graduating in 1946.[8]

In 1948, Park was arrested for having connections to the South Korean Workers' Party amidst a crackdown on leftist insurgent groups and uprisings in South Chŏlla and Cheju. Though he was initially sentenced to death, he was released after providing valuable intelligence on the party's activities, and while he was thereafter assigned to a civilian intelligence position, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 allowed to restart his military career with his reputation essentially untarnished. The war established the military as one of the most important institutions in South Korea, and with Park continuing to ascend in rank alongside many fellow Manchukuo Army veterans and Korea Military Academy veterans, he began to dream of leading a coup, first considering such a measure as early as 1956 amidst a fraudulent presidential election won by an increasingly unpopular Syngman Rhee.[9] After Rhee was ousted from power in 1960 by the student-led April 19 Revolution, South Korea was governed by a democratic parliamentary government led by Prime Minister Chang Myŏn. However, the Chang government was ineffective and unpopular among the electorate, leading to growing discontent within the military. Seizing the opportunity, Park led a coup alongside other army officers on May 16, 1961, setting the stage for him to take full power a year later.

Park and his comrades saw themselves as revolutionaries acting to save the South Korean state and its people from the corruption and ineffective governance of the Rhee and Chang governments.[10] In 1961, South Korea was still yet to recover from the chaos and destruction engendered by the Korean War, and with a per-capita GDP of roughly 100 USD, it ranked among the world's poorest countries. Meanwhile, its

7 Kyung Moon Hwang, *A History of Korea: An Episodic Narrative*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave, Macmillan Education, 2017), 229.

8 Yong-Sup Han, "The May Sixteenth Military Coup," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 36-37.

9 Han, "The May Sixteenth Military Coup," 38-41.

10 Han, "The May Sixteenth Military Coup," 45-47.

northern neighbor had managed to largely rebuild itself with Soviet and East German assistance, and Kim Il-sung had successfully purged most of his political opponents; at this point, the North appeared to be noticeably stronger and stabler than the South. Park saw North Korea's economic superiority as an existential threat; his junta therefore publicly placed heavy emphasis on their plans to focus on economic policy, naming their interim government the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction to underscore their economic commitments and rolling out ambitious proposals for reform.[11]

Park, like Lyndon Johnson, was a puzzling figure with a complex personality. He was particularly invested in South Korea's development; he had long been an admirer of Japan's successful industrialization during the Meiji period, and although he had Japanophilic tendencies, he was above all a staunch Korean nationalist who had a desire to build a "rich nation [and] strong army" by pursuing an economic growth strategy that would allow him to outcompete his adversaries in Pyongyang and, in time, lift South Korea into the same echelon of prosperity as Japan and the West.[12] Park was defined by his many contradictory characteristics: his admiration for Japanese *bushido* culture and his patriotic devotion to South Korea, his delight at the destruction of the centuries-old Korean caste system and his uncompromising commitment to an orderly and militaristic rule, and his flirtation with leftist groups before suddenly rebranding himself as a stalwart anti-communist all bewilder any biographer or historian. But there was something undoubtable about the Park Chung-hee that Lyndon Johnson came to know: this was a man who would go to extraordinary lengths to defend his government's interests – so much so that South Korea's relationship with the U.S. came to be nearly synonymous with Park's relationship with whoever occupied the Oval Office.

Contextualizing the U.S.-South Korea Relationship

By the time Lyndon Johnson took office in November 1963, the United States and South Korea had shared a close military and political alliance for more than fifteen years. When South Korea officially became an independent state as the Republic of Korea in August 1948, it retained strong ties with the United States, who had previously occupied the

11 Han, "The May Sixteenth Military Coup," 54-55.

12 Han, "The May Sixteenth Military Coup," 31.

southern half of the Korean peninsula under a military government. Though the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 ostensibly brought Seoul and Washington ever closer, especially regarding security matters, the lack of immediate defense of the South and near-unification of the peninsula under the North sparked lasting fears and a subtle mistrust of the U.S. among South Korean officials. Disagreements between Syngman Rhee and American military and political leaders further signaled the limitations to the U.S.-South Korea alliance. For example, Rhee was adamant in his desire to fully reunify the peninsula under his government, and when an armistice was finally agreed to and signed in July 1953, the Rhee regime refused to ratify the document. When later that year the U.S. and South Korea signed the Mutual Defense Treaty, which solidified the U.S.'s role as the primary guarantor of South Korea's military security, South Korean officials were concerned by the document's omission of a provision mandating American military intervention in the event of an attack on South Korea. This vulnerability in particular would go on to play a major role in influencing Park's security policy vis-a-vis the United States.

Syngman Rhee, though a familiar figure to the American security community, began to have a falling out of sorts with the U.S. in the final few years of his presidency. Rhee frustrated officials in Washington by failing to provide South Korea with a sense of direction in the aftermath of the war; when Rhee left office, the country was hardly any less poor or weak than it was when the armistice was signed. Rhee's decision to revise the constitution to permit himself to run for an unlimited number of presidential terms in 1956 and stubborn refusal to consider normalizing diplomatic relations with Japan further hampered his relationship with the U.S. When student protests culminating in the April 19 Movement threatened to oust Rhee from power in 1960, Washington refused to intervene on his behalf and save his regime.

When Park and other officers overthrew the Chang Myŏn government in May 1961, they faced the challenge of convincing the U.S. to acquiesce to, if not endorse, their rule over South Korea. Though some of the circumstances of the political situation in South Korea at the time worked to the junta's advantage, notably the lack of a strong civil society, the relative loyalty of the military to the coup leaders,[13] and the lack of viable alternatives to support in place of Park's entourage, the U.S. held

13 Han, "The May Sixteenth Military Coup," 52-53.

significant leverage over the junta in that they were able to withhold its rights to legitimacy and overt support.[14] American officials were willing to accept the new regime, but they were wary of its authoritarian inclinations, namely its persecution of dissident groups and its risky economic policy decisions.[15] Ultimately, the U.S. government's apparent "wait-and-see" strategy was not representative of genuine indecisiveness but rather a calculated move designed to minimize Washington's qualms with a government that was otherwise worthy of U.S. support.

The U.S. ultimately pushed Park and his colleagues the hardest with respect to returning to civilian rule and economic management practices. U.S. policymakers wary of restraining the junta should they move policy decisions forward without consulting with them first hoped that holding elections and dissolving the military-led Supreme Council for National Reconstruction would grant them more sway over South Korean politics and maximize domestic political stability. In a similar vein, the U.S. refused to provide Park's regime with much of the capital it desired to pursue its proposed five-year economic development plan, which entailed a number of heavy and chemical industry projects alongside an aggressive expansionary monetary policy.[16] In effect, Washington had veto power over any decisions made by Seoul, greatly stifling Park's ability to set his ambitious agenda in motion. Though the U.S. undoubtedly caused Park much frustration, Park was nonetheless able to capitalize on some American weaknesses, notably the dissociation between the interests of the Pentagon, the Department of State, and the CIA and other intelligence agencies. Moreover, Park recognized that the best possible conduit for much-needed aid and capital ran through institutions in Washington, and with that, he recognized that illustrating his government's loyalty to the U.S. and alignment with American foreign policy would enable him to secure support for elements of his agenda in return. This firmly established a U.S.-South Korea relationship that was largely transactional rather than genuinely congenial, as Seoul and Washington came to ground their alliance not on the basis of mutual goodwill but rather on a careful avoidance of discord due to mutual security and political interests that facilitated a quid pro quo style of diplomacy. Though this partnership

14 Taehyun Kim and Chang Jae Baik, "Taming and Tamed by the United States," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 63-64.

15 Kim and Baik, "Taming and Tamed by the United States," 66.

16 Kim and Baik, "Taming and Tamed by the United States," 75-76.

provided mutual benefits for both parties for much of the first several years of Park's presidency, it was inevitable that disagreement between the U.S. and South Korea would have grave consequences for the two countries' alliance and the relationship between their leaders.

Normalizing Relations With Japan

When Park came to power in 1961, he was presented with a risky but promising opportunity in normalizing diplomatic relations with Japan, a move long desired by the U.S. to enhance the strength of its security partnerships in Northeast Asia. Syngman Rhee, who had lobbied American policymakers to support Korea's independence from Japan for decades before coming to power, refused to open meaningful dialogue with Tokyo during his tenure; he demanded that the Japanese government take full responsibility for transgressions committed during the colonial period and only acquiesced to small-scale talks after 1951 that achieved little progress. Chang Myŏn was interested in improving bilateral relations in the hope of boosting South Korea's stagnant economy and providing his government with much-needed political legitimacy,[17] but his ouster by Park and other military officers prevented serious progression in negotiations from occurring.

Park's interest in promoting collaboration with Japan was rooted in his longstanding admiration for the country's advancement during the Meiji era, a process which he hoped to emulate in South Korea for both economic and security reasons. He further recognized his ability to endear himself to U.S. officials by delivering a desirable diplomatic milestone and securing their approval of his domestic political agenda by circumventing market forces to pursue economic growth amidst shrinking U.S. aid packages. Though Japanese leaders initially demurred on the issue of opening substantive dialogue with Park's regime, especially given their distaste at the overthrow of a democratic government by military officers, Park's overtures quickly shifted the mood in Tokyo, signaling that he was a leader who would work to prevent the emergence of another anti-Japanese government across the East Sea and the augmentation of the North Korean security threat while concomitantly reversing the course of previously anemic bilateral negotiations and embracing closer relations

17 Jung-Hoon Lee, "Normalization of Relations with Japan: Toward a New Partnership," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 433-434.

between South Korea and Japan.[18] The U.S. came to encourage an agreement between the two governments, with Dean Rusk, who served as Secretary of State under both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, assuming the role of mediator between Seoul and Tokyo in July 1961.[19] Rusk, who would later become a trusted advisor to Johnson, ultimately played a major role in influencing Johnson's attitude toward Park.

By the time Johnson became President in November 1963 following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a character with whom Park had a largely amicable relationship, significant progress toward a settlement between South Korea and Japan had been made. The U.S.'s role as a mediator in negotiations deepened shortly after Johnson entered office, as increasingly overt public discontent in South Korea with Park's overtures and the growing security crisis in Indochina engendered by Johnson's escalation of American involvement in Vietnam saw Washington double down on its commitments to present an image of unified anti-communism among its Asian allies. Moreover, South Korea's willingness to dispatch troops to Vietnam saw U.S. officials become more understanding of Park's perspective, leading them to encourage Japan to make concessions to South Korea and taking a more active role in aiding Park as he navigated the political ramifications of approving a normalization agreement.[20]

Meetings between high-ranking officials, including trusted advisors to both Park and Johnson, occurred frequently between the time of Johnson's ascendance to the presidency and the eventual ratification of the Treaty of Basic Relations in June 1965. In April 1964, senior State Department officials including Secretary Rusk met with some of Park's top colleagues, including Prime Minister Ch'oe Tu-sŏn, Ambassador Kim Chŏng-ryŏl, and members of Park's Democratic Republican Party in the National Assembly. The men were cordial in their conversations, and the American officials present showed consideration to the concerns of their South Korean counterparts, with Rusk deferring to Prime Minister Ch'oe to give an explanation of the domestic political situation and his accompanying concerns. Ch'oe was candid in his remarks, noting his government was hoping to finalize an agreement with Japan but was wary of the unpopularity of such a move; he asked the Secretary of State to

18 Lee, "Normalization of Relations with Japan," 434-436.

19 Lee, "Normalization of Relations with Japan," 440.

20 Lee, "Normalization of Relations with Japan," 446-448.

recall the concerns Park had voiced during previous meetings Rusk had had with the South Korean President.[21] Ch'oe later met with Johnson alongside Ambassador Kim, where the U.S. President tersely expressed his wish that negotiations soon reach a successful conclusion and his trust in South Korean officials to close out an agreement; Ch'oe echoed his sentiments and thanked Johnson for his hospitality.[22] Though Johnson was less concerned with the fundamentals of foreign policy than his zealous domestic policy agenda, internal communication within the U.S. foreign policy establishment suggests U.S.-South Korea relations were rather friendly and characterized by relative patience on the part of the Americans toward Park's convoluted domestic political considerations. Johnson was also readily made aware of senior foreign policy officials' view that Park's ambition was a major reason for the successful direction of South Korea-Japan negotiations.[23]

When Johnson and Park met together in May 1965, marking their first time together since Park's attendance at the funeral of John F. Kennedy, the two men were very friendly with each other, as would be expected during a relative high point in U.S.-South Korea relations. Park and Johnson, who appeared to find genuine accord in part due to their common past as former schoolteachers, in turn discussed bilateral educational and scientific collaboration and exchange. They then issued a joint communique in which they exchanged praise for their respective commitments to their alliance. Johnson expressed his delight with Park's leadership in brokering the diplomatic normalization agreements, which by this point were nearing ratification, and praised the economic growth Park's government had engineered;[24] Park had responded in kind with gratitude for South Korea's partnership with the U.S. at his arrival ceremony the day prior.[25] The process of drafting, finalizing, and signing the Treaty on Basic Relations, specifically the role exercised by the U.S. as an arbitrator between South Korea and Japan, had successfully

21 Memorandum of Conversation, 9 April 1964, Box 254, Volume 1, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

22 Memorandum of Conversation, 9 April 1964, Box 254, Volume 1, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

23 Memorandum for the President, 17 May 1965, Box 256, Park Visit Briefing Book, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

24 Memorandum for the President, Joint Statement of the President Following Discussion With the President of Korea, 18 May 1965, Box 147, Statements Files, Johnson Library.

25 Remarks of the President at the Arrival Ceremony of His Excellency Chung Hee Park, President of the Republic of Korea, 17 May 1965, Box 146, Statements Files, Johnson Library.

strengthened the U.S.-South Korea alliance, bolstered South Korea's importance in U.S. foreign policy toward Asia, and fostered amicable correspondence between Park Chung-hee and Lyndon Johnson.

Nonetheless, the ratification of the Treaty on Basic Relations sowed the initial seeds of strife in the U.S.-South Korea alliance in some respects. As agreed to by South Korean and Japanese negotiators after extensive haggling, Park's government was the beneficiary of 300 million USD in grants, 200 million USD in Official Development Assistance loans, and 100 million USD in commercial loans.[26] This large sum, which the Japanese government was content to label as reparations for their thirty-five-year occupation of Korea, was then used by Park as seed money for ambitious industrial development projects and large-scale investments in infrastructure that accelerated South Korea's already high economic growth rate. With U.S. aid already on the decline, the settlement enabled Park to assume greater agency after securing greater deference from Washington, and his power was reinforced by a significantly more formidable economy that continued to grow at a rapid pace. Though the U.S.-South Korea relationship had benefited greatly from the course of Seoul-Tokyo negotiations, Park's willingness to interact with the U.S. was regardless motivated by necessity, and given his fiercely nationalistic tendencies, it stands to reason that his decision to rely on stalwart American support was a calculated but begrudging one. With Park spared from much of the heavy U.S. pressure that afflicted him and his colleagues during the early days of his leadership, he likely felt emboldened by his successes and newfound independence – and with that, the stage for future tension was set. It was only a matter of time after 1965 that the friendly facade of the relationship between Park and Lyndon Johnson – and that between Seoul and Washington – would unravel completely.

Entering the Vietnam War

When South Korean troops first arrived in Vietnam in 1964, South Korea was not an ally of South Vietnam nor a party to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, and Park had long considered his primary concern to be the pressing security situation on the Korean peninsula. Nonetheless, South Korea had the highest per-capita participation rate in the Vietnam War and was second to only the U.S. in

26 Lee, "Normalization of Relations with Japan," 445.

terms of total deployment numbers, with some 320,000 troops dispatched in total. Park also displayed his commitment to supporting American interests by sending the Tiger and White Horse Divisions, among the army's most elite combat units, in 1965 and 1966, respectively.[27] Park assigned Ch'ae Myŏng-sin, a longtime confidant and fellow graduate of the Korea Military Academy with whom he had overthrown the Chang Myŏn government, to serve as the commander of South Korea's forces in Vietnam. Though striking on the surface, Park's choice to deploy troops to Vietnam was a shrewd one primarily aimed at optimizing South Korea's security situation.

That said, there were significant economic benefits obtained from the series of troop dispatches Park authorized. Though they were paid noticeably less than their American counterparts, South Korean soldiers earned significantly higher monthly wages than the average South Korean citizen, enabling Park's regime to secure much-needed hard currency by collecting portions of servicemen's paychecks and boosting the economy with the injection of more cash into the nascent South Korean market. Moreover, troops sent to Vietnam were accompanied by civilian workers, many of whom were employed in construction or other services that proved to be reliable money-makers for the Park regime. The U.S. also provided significant financial compensation to Seoul for the trouble of its participation in Vietnam, providing further funding for Park's industrialization efforts.

National security concerns trumped economic ones for Park, however, and his decision to assist the U.S. not only fit into a broader strategy to bolster his regime's interests vis-a-vis American support but also came with notable precedent. Syngman Rhee had offered to send troops to Vietnam in 1954 in the hopes of preventing the U.S. from withdrawing some of its forces in the aftermath of the Korean War, but then-President Dwight Eisenhower declined Rhee's proposal, as he knew the American public would not support the U.S.'s military presence in Korea should South Korean forces be active elsewhere. After taking power, Park had personally told John F. Kennedy while on a visit to Washington in 1961 that he would be willing to dispatch troops to Vietnam, but Kennedy, ever-cautious in his approach to foreign policy and hoping to

27 Min Yong Lee, "The Vietnam War: South Korea's Search for National Security," in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 403-404.

avoid a deterioration in the situation in Vietnam, similarly turned Park down.[28] Park had also extended significant support to the U.S. military in exchange for security benefits prior to South Korean involvement in Vietnam, going so far as to authorize the careful regulation of prostitution in military camptowns with U.S. support in the hope that U.S. military officials and servicemen would maintain high morale and continue to safeguard South Korea from the looming threat of the North.[29]

When Lyndon Johnson signaled his desire to brand the Vietnam War as an international struggle against communism and made his first formal request to South Korea for troops in May 1964, it stands to reason that Park was likely delighted with Johnson's departure from his predecessor's more restrained attitude. Park swiftly began planning for a troop dispatch, and after successfully steering a proposal to send 140 non-combat troops through the National Assembly, South Korean forces began their participation in Vietnam in September 1964. A second request from Washington came three months later, to which Park obliged by dispatching an additional 2,000 non-combatant medics and military engineers. Combat troops began arriving in the tens of thousands with a major dispatch in the middle of 1965, with a second dispatch following in the spring of 1966 as American escalation of the conflict continued.[30]

In some respects, the provision of large numbers of soldiers by South Korea deepened the sense of cooperation between Park's government and the U.S., helping to endear Park and the country he led to Johnson and other high-ranking American officials. Imitating many of their measures from the process of arbitrating the Treaty on Basic Relations, the U.S. security community took special care to reassure Park and avoid consequences that would damage his regime in the domestic political arena,[31] and Johnson himself acknowledged the obstacles that Park faced in dispatching troops to Vietnam and his willingness to provide further American assistance in his letters to the South Korean leader.[32] Reflecting the deepening relationship between the two countries, Johnson

28 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 408-409.

29 David Vine, "'My Body Was Not Mine, but the US Military's,'" POLITICO (POLITICO, November 3, 2015), https://www.politico.eu/article/my-body-was-not-mine-but-the-u-s-militarys/.

30 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 408-409.

31 Winthrop G. Brown to William Bundy, 10 July 1965, Box 254, Volume 2, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

32 Lyndon Johnson to Chung Hee Park, 31 December 1967, Box 5, President Park, Vol. I, Head of State Correspondence File, Johnson Library.

visited South Korea in October and November of 1966; while there, he praised the work done by Park's government to modernize the country and combat communism across Asia,[33] signaling the extent to which Vietnam had made Park one of Johnson's most important partners. For his part, Johnson seemed to enjoy his trip, raving about the advances which the country had made, praising the people of South Korea as "great, proud, [intelligent, energetic, and hardworking],"[34] and enjoying *pudae-tchigae* enough that the popular stew earned the moniker of "Johnsontang."[35]

In spite of the apparent agreement and cooperation generated by the mobilization of armed forces by both countries, Park's decision to dispatch troops to Vietnam can also be categorized as a part of his security strategy of strengthening ties with the U.S. in that it deepened the extent to which the U.S.-South Korea relationship was a transactional one. Though Park was eager to send forces to Vietnam even before Johnson's initial call for help, the use of pressure and leverage on both sides was pronounced from the very beginning of the venture; for instance, even as Park worked to set the earliest troop deployments in motion, U.S. Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown suggested that should South Korea refuse to dispatch troops, the U.S. would withdraw some of its personnel in Korea in response.[36] Park's statecraft followed a similar scheme to extract desirable concessions from the U.S., namely the modernization of his military, economic assistance, continued American military presence to provide deterrence, and Washington's acquiescence to his domestic political agenda; for this, Park was willing to support the interests of the Johnson administration by providing troops, supplies, and additional personnel and satisfying U.S. military personnel serving in South Korea as much as possible.

When both Seoul and Washington were amenable to barter for their respective needs, as was generally the case during the escalation of the Vietnam War up until early 1968, the two governments were able to maintain a stable relationship and seemingly strengthen their alliance, even when their correspondences were on the aloof side as a result of

33 Seoul Speech, 29 October 1966, Box 8, Asian Trip, National Security File, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Johnson Library.

34 Seoul Speech, 29 October 1966, Box 8, Asian Trip, National Security File, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Johnson Library.

35 Hahna Yoon, "How a South Korean Comfort Food Went Global," BBC (BBC, June 10, 2020), https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200609-how-a-south-korean-comfort-food-went-global.

36 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 410.

underlying tensions and disagreements. Warning signs of a breakdown in relations were evident well before the *Pueblo* incident, however; after Park authorized the first dispatch of combat troops in 1965, quiet frustrations among Park and his colleagues simmered when U.S. officials balked at their request that the U.S. revise the Mutual Defense Treaty to require that the American military intervene in the event of an attack on South Korea.[37] When the Americans once again refused to consider the same request in return for Park's second dispatch of troops the following spring, South Korean officials, including Park, began to remonstrate with the U.S. more forcefully. Vice President Hubert Humphrey visited Seoul to offer additional economic concessions and reassure Park of the U.S.'s security commitment, but the gesture did little to mollify Park and other senior South Korean policymakers.[38] With the anti-war movement gaining ground in the U.S., Park increasingly feared that the U.S. might fail to deliver on its promises to defend South Korea in the event of an armed attack. Though the two countries continued to cooperate, there was an undeniable tension building between them, and in the event they could no longer see eye-to-eye with each other, there would be grave repercussions for the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

A Partnership Imperiled: The Blue House Raid and the Pueblo Incident

One of the preeminent reasons that the *Pueblo* incident contributed to such a serious downturn in U.S.-South Korea relations was that it was immediately preceded by an assassination attempt on Park. On January 21, 1968, North Korean commandos attempted to raid the Blue House, South Korea's presidential residence, and kill Park. Though the effort was unsuccessful and Park survived physically unscathed, he was left horrified and infuriated by North Korea's provocation. The situation went from bad to worse just two days later when North Korean forces seized the U.S.S. *Pueblo*, an intelligence-gathering vessel, in the East Sea. Not only did Seoul and Washington propose different responses to the crises, with the former calling for immediate military retaliation and the latter emphasizing the need for restraint, but the U.S. became almost entirely fixated on freeing the crew of the *Pueblo*, negotiating with the North

37 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 414.

38 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 417-418.

Koreans at Panmunjom and turning a blind eye to the assault on the Blue House.[39] The U.S., seeking to avoid a military confrontation, also began notifying Soviet officials of their correspondence with North Korean negotiators within weeks of the *Pueblo*'s seizure.[40]

Park was incensed by the Americans' dialogue with North Korea and apparent nonchalance regarding the commando attack. Some of his colleagues proposed military sanctions against Pyongyang and the withdrawal of South Korean troops in Vietnam, and Park himself even considered launching a unilateral military attack on the North in response to the attempt on his life. However, American officials led by special envoy Cyrus R. Vance, a trusted Johnson advisor, strong-armed Park by threatening to withdraw U.S. forces in Korea in the event Park bucked their will. The series of events was a brutal wake-up call for Park: despite what he considered to be concerted efforts to prove his loyalty to and support for the U.S., he felt he and his country had been betrayed. With Johnson also beginning to reduce the extent of American involvement in Vietnam as popular support for the war waned in the U.S., Park prepared to similarly withdraw South Korean forces and address security concerns posed by North Korea, a process he began during the Nixon administration and carefully timed to maximize American compensation and concessions[41] – thereby maintaining much of the transactional essence of the U.S.-South Korea relationship.

As a result of these events, Park's personal relationship with Johnson suffered mightily, especially as Johnson, a man whose interest in foreign policy was tepid at best, largely heeded the advice given to him by other officials and doubled down on his other ambitions, none of which had anything serious to do with Park's beloved South Korea. Though Park was forced to protest to State Department and military officials in the direct aftermath of the Blue House raid and the seizure of the *Pueblo*, he had an opportunity to speak directly with Johnson at a summit in Honolulu in April 1968. Though Johnson was preoccupied with the situation in Vietnam and hoping to push for a peace agreement to end the war after announcing he would not seek a second full term as President the month prior, Park arrived in Hawaii an irate and anxious man with

39 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 420-421.

40 Dean Rusk to William J. Porter, 19 February 1968, Box 10, The President's File for Korea, Vietnam (Briefings), National Security File, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Johnson Library.

41 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 421-422.

genuine reservations about the survival of his country and outright pessimism regarding the reliability of the superpower that was meant to be his most dependable ally. Moreover, though Park was frustrated by the Johnson administration's inaction in response to the Blue House raid, he was annoyed by Johnson's decision not to seek reelection, as it essentially guaranteed the next U.S. president would roll back American involvement in Vietnam[42] – thereby damaging Park's ability to secure U.S. security assistance by reducing the need for South Korean troops by proxy and casting doubt on the extent that American efforts at containment would continue to entail a strong U.S. presence in Korea.

Though the two heads of state exchanged pleasantries when they first sat down for their morning conversation at the Honolulu summit, Park soon struggled to conceal his frustration. As the two discussed the course of the Vietnam War and the political considerations that had impacted it, Park angrily asked why the U.S. could not do more to bomb North Vietnamese targets and questioned the Americans' hesitance to fully sever the communists' supply lines coming through Haiphong. Park felt that there was no need whatsoever for bombing restrictions,[43] a view not shared by his American counterpart. For Johnson, Park's view was easily dismissible: not only would escalating Operation Rolling Thunder have been politically unpalatable, but it would have irreversibly set back Johnson's hopes at finalizing a peace agreement and run the risk of widening the war to include China and the Soviet Union if their ships or vehicles were destroyed.

Park and Johnson also spoke at length about the tense political situation in Korea. Park repeatedly emphasized that his country's defense capabilities were insufficient to counter the threat posed by the North; he noted that General Charles Bonesteel, the commander of United States Forces Korea, concurred with this view. Park said that Seoul had been "invaded" in January and that Pyongyang's aggression constituted the threat of Korea becoming a second Vietnam; he pleaded to Johnson that the additional 100 million USD in aid that Johnson and Cyrus Vance had submitted to the U.S. Congress was far from enough to address the situation. Johnson hardly budged, advising Park to speak with Vance and

42 Memorandum of Conversation, 17 April 1968, Box 256, Volume 6, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

43 Memorandum of Conversation, 17 April 1968, Box 256, Volume 6, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

General Earle Wheeler instead should he have concerns.[44] Vance, of course, had been the man to vex Park by preventing him from holding North Korea to account for the attack on the Blue House. Johnson's final words of the morning certainly didn't make the South Korean President feel any more at ease, as he gave a bland promise that he would "do his best" to handle the ongoing crisis.[45]

Park had another opportunity to make his case to the seemingly indifferent Johnson in a separate afternoon meeting. The two continued to struggle to find full consensus on the situations in Vietnam and Korea; after Johnson inquired about Park's reluctance to extend the terms of many of the South Korean troops stationed in Vietnam and promised he was doing his best to push compensation through Congress, Park exasperatedly wondered aloud in Korean to his interpreter, "Why can't [President Johnson] understand the true Korean situation?"[46] As Park continued to attempt to relay his unease, speaking of Seoul as a city preparing for a fight to the last man and even how he kept a loaded carbine beside his bed in the Blue House, Johnson seemed unmoved, saying that security guarantees for South Korea were contingent upon Park agreeing to send an additional 6,000 men to Vietnam – a request Park bluntly stated he felt uncomfortable meeting until the political situation improved. Johnson, meanwhile, said he would struggle to justify more aid to Park's government to Congress if South Korea could not provide additional troops.[47] Park, an authoritarian strongman with an almost Nietzschean desire to capitalize on what power he had to further his aspirations and protect his country, was never going to see eye-to-eye with the leader of a liberal democracy who, equally ambitious as he was, had limited his days in office to save face and focus on delivering a much-needed consolation to the American people.

Park and Johnson both made errors that led their correspondence and the relationship between their countries to become strained. Park made the costly mistake of overestimating the reliability of his primary

44 Memorandum of Conversation, 17 April 1968, Box 256, Volume 6, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

45 Memorandum of Conversation, 17 April 1968, Box 256, Volume 6, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

46 Memorandum of Conversation, 17 April 1968, Box 256, Volume 6, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

47 Memorandum of Conversation, 17 April 1968, Box 256, Volume 6, National Security File, Country File, Korea, Johnson Library.

ally, failing to recognize the fact that the country he saw himself working to protect and strengthen was a minor concern in the eyes of U.S. policymakers and almost never preoccupied Lyndon Johnson. Johnson, meanwhile, steered his country into crises by failing to exercise stronger leadership on foreign policy issues and exhibiting a shortsighted willingness to damage American leadership credentials by ignoring the very real fears of an ally he and many other officials hoped would be a long-term partner in Asia. Both men, however, inevitably came to be victims of their own ambitiousness, the very trait that had carried them from rural poverty to the presidency of their respective countries against all odds. In his relentless pursuit of a more powerful and prosperous South Korea, Park saw an opportunity in enhancing his country's relationship with the U.S., and to a certain extent, he was successful – South Korea experienced one of the most extraordinary cases of economic growth the world has ever seen, with its national interests still supported by a close alliance with the U.S. But Park's clinging to power and inability to fully secure his country's interests on his own made a collision course with Lyndon Johnson, a man with his own lofty but divergent ambitions, an inescapable fate that would not only imperil the U.S.-South Korea alliance but culminate in Park's political and personal demise.

Conclusion

Though the U.S.-South Korea relationship was bitter during the final months of Lyndon Johnson's tenure, it reached an ugly nadir during Richard Nixon's presidency. Park was enraged by many of Nixon's policy decisions, including Vietnamization methods, the Guam Doctrine (which saw U.S. troop numbers in South Korea reduced from 64,000 in 1969 to 40,000 in 1972),[48] and the normalization of relations with Mao Zedong's China. This shift from a more active containment policy to one of détente had grave consequences for Park, who saw South Korea as beleaguered by communism abroad with waning American support and feared domestic instability engendered by Washington's decreasing dependence on his leadership could open the door to pro-democracy activists or North Korean agitators ousting him from power. Perceiving himself to be under unprecedented pressure, Park staged a self-coup in October 1972 and replaced South Korea's constitution with the Yushin Constitution, a

48 Lee, "The Vietnam War," 422-423.

highly authoritarian document that granted him the right to run for an unlimited number of six-year terms, the ability to appoint one-third of the National Assembly's membership, and the power to rule by decree. The remaining years of Park's rule were characterized by growing public opposition to his regime and increasing concerns in the U.S. regarding the human rights situation in South Korea, especially during the Carter administration. After protests gripped the cities of Busan and Masan in October 1979, Park was shot and killed by Kim Chae-gyu, the head of the Korean CIA, whose motives remain the subject of controversy.

Though neither Park nor Johnson lived to witness the full scope of their legacies, there is little doubt about the impact the two men had on their respective countries' histories. Between an astounding period of economic growth and an almost universally reviled era of dictatorship, South Koreans have continued to reckon with what Park bequeathed to the country when he died, and even if his name is mentioned less and less often, Americans continue to debate amongst themselves whether the government should once again assume the roles that Johnson so passionately believed it should. Regardless of how their places in history are assessed, however, the relationship these men shared undeniably continues to shape one of the United States' most crucial alliances, both for better and for worse. As leaders in Seoul and Washington today work in tandem to combat Chinese and North Korean aggression, promote the spread of liberal democracy in Asia and beyond, and ensure cordial economic cooperation between two of the world's strongest and most advanced markets, there is plenty still to learn from the remarkable feats – and the regrettable failures – of the monumental statesmen that preceded them.

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