

How Park Chung-hee Made the Most of the South Korea-US Vietnam War Alliance

Written by Ben Alperstein

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This paper intends to offer a new, positive conclusion on the ROK/U.S. Vietnam War alliance building on that of previous scholars.^[1] South Korea made a strong impact on the war effort as an American ally fighting on their behalf, sending more than 300,000 troops and incurring 3,800 casualties.^[2] In return for sending troops, the ROK received numerous benefits, economically, militarily, and even politically. Despite these effects, the alliance agreements are often ignored in both American and international accounts of the ROK or Vietnam War.^[3] The few English secondary sources that do exist on the alliance tend to ignore the South Korean perspective or overemphasize South Korea's unfavorable position at the end of the war, when opportunities for bartering dried up.^[4] Thus, building on valuable portions of existing sources supplemented by a plethora of official U.S. documents, this research adds a new perspective to an understudied topic. Specifically, it reveals what previous scholarship has failed to properly recognize: Park Chung-hee made the most of the Vietnam War alliance.

Park's approach to the negotiations was key to his success, as he displayed patience following his prior ambitions; his non-committal attitude forced the United States to offer maximum concessions in return for ROK troops.^[5] Undoubtedly, circumstances allowed him to take advantage of the alliance with the Americans. In particular, the Johnson administration made mistakes which were subsequently exploited.^[6] This was also exacerbated within the context of a political climate which caused the U.S. to rely on South Korea beyond what could be expected of a much weaker ally.^[7] While Park's limited negotiating success under Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon, might seem to offer a counterargument, his diplomatic demise tends to be exaggerated.^[8] Park still bargained, the U.S. still helped South Korea, and de-escalation was mutual.^[9] More importantly, by this point, due to his prior negotiations, he had already extracted key benefits from the alliance.^[10] The numerous lasting effects of the wartime alliance, for both Park and South Korea, serve as evidence of the relationship. Park and the ROK capitalized on an opportunity presented to their country when they were in desperate need of one.

South Korean attempts at allying with the U.S. in Vietnam had existed for almost as long as South Korea itself. To be precise, the ROK made a conscious effort to further the military link between the two countries dating back to 1954, just a year after the armistice of the Korean War.^[11] Syngman Rhee originally offered to send troops to South Vietnam for security reasons, as he was concerned that the U.S. government would reduce the number of troops in Korea.^[12] By sending troops to support American democratic ideals for South Vietnam, Rhee could demand heightened security assistance from the U.S. in return. Although President Eisenhower rejected his offer because American public opinion would not support a continued presence in South Korea if the South Koreans were off fighting elsewhere, Rhee's idea persisted once Park stepped into power.^[13] Like Rhee, Park sought an agreement for strategic reasons. North Korea posed a constant security threat, and he wished to prevent the U.S. from redeploying its troops from Korea, where they offered protection from the North Koreans, to Vietnam.^[14] More generally, he hoped to become allies with America, seeing an opportunity for troop modernization, combat experience, domestic help, and other potential benefits.

ROK military assistance early in the war was a direct result of Park's persistence. While the U.S. did initiate South Korea's involvement by formally requesting ROK noncombat troops on May 1, 1964, South Korea had been offering assistance for years.^[15] Along with Rhee's aforementioned efforts, Park told President Kennedy in 1961 that he was

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ready to dispatch troops “if requested”.^[16] Kennedy, like Eisenhower before him, politely declined the offer, simply stating that he would keep Park informed of future developments. Kennedy hoped that the Vietnamese situation would not deteriorate to the point that South Korea was needed. Park persisted nonetheless, sending a mission to examine ways to assist South Vietnam militarily in 1962.^[17]

The results of the military mission revealed Park’s underlying motives: while his advisors recommended non-combat assistance, the leader drew a vastly different conclusion. He decided it was his obligation to accommodate any U.S. dispatch request, citing both “economic and security considerations” to ROK officials.^[18] Notably, the conversation occurred well in advance of any request actually occurring. The mission also occurred after South Korea directly contacted Vietnam, a rarity given they generally communicated with the U.S. throughout.^[19] Unsatisfied by the American responses thus far, Park hoped to use South Vietnam to drum up further interest in ROK assistance. Once successful, he could then present Vietnam’s requests for help to the American leadership as evidence that South Korea was needed. When President Johnson finally made a formal request in 1964, Park was ready and quickly dispatched the non-combat recruits.^[20]

Park was generally cooperative towards the first American requests. For example, the ROK asked for little besides fee coverage for the deployment of the medical/engineering “Dove Unit”.^[21] This unit performed a strictly non-combat role, as the ROK opposition government restricted their ability to fire unless fired upon, so Park did not expect the agreement to pay great dividends.^[22] The troop deployment was easy for Park to agree to, especially because the deployment posed little domestic risk. In hindsight, given Park’s exorbitant demands for later troop deployments, it may seem odd that he did not drive a hard bargain over the deployment. The relatively easy Korean commitment did not offer him much negotiation leverage, and he had to be careful as the U.S. was not yet dependent on South Korean military aid for the war effort. Sending the Dove Unit also helped him get a foot in the door. Even then, however, the regime’s strategic roots were evident.

Despite his aforementioned general cooperativity, Park refused to budge on the overseas allowances he desired for his Dove Unit, having already promised troops payment greatly in excess of what the Americans were willing to fund.^[23] U.S. State Department negotiators tried to convince ROK officials to back down, but to no avail. Following negotiations, ROK officers made as much as \$6.50 per day at the rank of colonel, while U.S. negotiators had attempted to limit the allowances “to one dollar per man per day”.^[24] More importantly, it set a precedent for the negotiations to come, when the ROK would send much larger combat divisions. Johnson was willing to spend money as needed, and the South Koreans saw that if they refused to budge, they could get what they wanted from Johnson despite what his administration’s negotiators claimed.^[25] Even these early negotiations over the Dove Unit showed the regime’s strategy for negotiating with the Americans during the Vietnam War: show interest prior to negotiations, then display the necessary patience for maximum gain.

After attempting for years to escalate the stakes of the alliance, Park finally got his wish in May, 1965, when the two sides began combat unit negotiations.^[26] However, once he got President Johnson to the bargaining table, Park’s attitude suddenly changed. It was no secret that Park wanted to provide combat help, and he never pretended otherwise. Instead, Park was careful to assure Johnson that he personally thought it was a good idea, but that he could not make a commitment due to the South Korean government’s potential objections.^[27] By using the parliament as an excuse, Park implied that the U.S. would need to offer extreme concessions to get him to agree to a deal, without downplaying his interest in the alliance itself. Despite Johnson’s push for a less ambiguous response, Park refused to budge or even offer an informal agreement.^[28] The U.S. had expected quick approval for the first ROK combat troop request, perhaps because of Park’s relative cooperation with earlier deployments.^[29] While Johnson’s staff had never suggested that the agreement would be subject to intense negotiation, Park continuously used parliamentary pressure as reason for demanding large concessions.^[30] Korean diplomats controlled the agenda and, when the dust settled, the U.S. had acceded to all but one of their demands. The U.S. promised not to reduce forces in South Korea without prior consultation, would provide all logistical and financial requirements for the South Korean troops (including equipment modernization), and give economic aid to South Korea — including a \$150 million development loan.^[31] Given the windfall he had successfully obtained, Park continued his winning strategy to even greater success the second time around.

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Perhaps it is no wonder given the gains made in May that the ROK leadership moved immediately to strike another agreement. Vice President Hubert Humphrey visited Seoul in January, 1966, and told Johnson that “President Park is anxious to be of greater help in Vietnam.”^[32] Yet, once negotiations began later that month, the ROK returned to its earlier tactics. Park appeared interested in reaching an agreement, stating that he had a “moral obligation” to provide help, but at the same time stressed that he would need economic aid in return.^[33] Humphrey’s notes stated that Park would be ultimately willing to send troops, so the U.S. knew he would eventually come to an agreement, and the list provided by the ROK was deemed “excessive” by the American negotiators.^[34] However, when the negotiations concluded on March 4, U.S. ambassador to South Korea Winthrop Brown again conceded most issues in Korea’s favor. The U.S. agreed to pay the costs associated with the deployment, help modernize the ROK army, provide equipment, and, most importantly, offer economic aid in excess of the first combat agreement.^[35] As historian Robert Blackburn stated, “never before in American history had the U.S. agreed to give such economic prerequisites to any ally for their help in fighting a war.”^[36]

Although these were the only two combat deployments to ultimately come to fruition, Park continued using similar tactics to similar effect in later years. In discussing a third combat agreement in December 1967, Park again controlled the agenda, requesting equipment for use in South Korea, rather than Vietnam.^[37] Johnson viewed the request favorably, but wanted the ROK to begin deployment based on his reassurances of future equipment. However, yet again, Park issued a polite refusal to any informal agreement, and Johnson acquiesced to his demands.^[38] Although ultimately a moot point due to the security issues that followed, Park had once again bested Johnson. Moreover, despite never going through with the deal, Park still received aid from it: by April, 1968, the U.S. had already delivered substantial military aid under the previous agreement.^[39] When pressed by Johnson, Park reneged, citing political obstacles.^[40]

These agreements were a boon for Park and South Korea, but it is also important to understand why his strategy succeeded. In regards to the negotiations themselves, U.S. misperceptions were continuously exploited by the ROK for maximum gain. This begins prior to the first agreement, and, more specifically, the circumstances surrounding it. The U.S. wanted ROK troops (to be discussed in more detail later), but there were also significant risks involved.

As U.S. political opponents were quick to point out, an alliance with South Korea could expose both countries to political attack. The potential alliance could cause the U.N. to withdraw its troops in Korea, and it may pique Taiwanese interest in participating in the war effort, fostering Chinese concerns.^[41] There was also military opposition, as many doubted the caliber of the ROK army. Furthermore, a new agreement would scuttle plans to reduce U.S. aid to South Korea.^[42] An alliance, and, more specifically, agreements that resulted in excessive concessions, were by no means a necessity for the Johnson administration. Yet, they occurred anyway, as Park’s strategic decisions were bolstered by a number of U.S. miscalculations.

American misperceptions were most pronounced in the negotiations for the first combat deployment, as there was never any concern that the ROK would refuse to send troops if its conditions were not met. In fact, Ambassador Brown was assured by an ROK official that “the government was determined to send combat troops and was not in any way bargaining with us.”^[43] The denial of bargaining was dishonest, but nonetheless it was evident that the ROK was eager to make a deal, and any mentions of internal opposition were used by Park as no more than a basic attempt at leverage. Brown drastically misread South Korea’s domestic political situation, stating that “Korea does not have to do this... it does involve Korea in some additional risks.”^[44] The “additional risks” mentioned referred to the controversy surrounding Japanese normalization, an agreement between South Korea and Japan heavily encouraged by the U.S. but hated by many South Koreans.^[45] Brown felt that the deployment could add to the anger, thus jeopardizing both agreements. Previous memos alluded to significant risk of creating a situation in which the ROK appeared to be nothing more than a “puppet” of the U.S.^[46] Ultimately, in agreeing to the conditions, Brown felt that the U.S. had “given him our maximum political ammunition.”^[47] In reality, he simply made an unnecessary concession.

Contrary to his belief that Japanese normalization made the combat agreement unlikely to go through, normalization may have actually made it more likely. Park, according to historian Nicholas Sarantakes, “faced serious difficulties in getting the [Japanese] agreement ratified, despite the authoritarian nature of his regime.”^[48] Therefore, in order to

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calm the public, Park needed to keep Korea as close as possible to the U.S. This meant keeping American troops on the peninsula by reaching an agreement on cooperation in Vietnam.^[49] Still, Brown did not see it this way, and neither did other members of the administration. Secretary of State Dean Rusk noted that he had been careful not to let negotiations leak publically because of its potential effect on ratification of the Japan treaty.^[50] It is telling that Park himself does not mention this concern; rather, Rusk and Brown appear to be attempting to read between the lines, and came to faulty conclusions.

Brown's errors were also particularly egregious because Park himself tried to convince him otherwise. While Park did use his government as an excuse for his demands, he also assured Brown that troop deployment would actually make the treaty's ratification easier.^[51] Had Brown understood this issue, the U.S. might have driven a harder bargain. After all, if troop deployment was ultimately viewed as a net positive like Park's statement implied, the details of the agreement could not have mattered too much. Fortunately for Park, Brown did not believe him, and ultimately acceded to his demands, figuring that a poor deal would have jeopardized both agreements. The problems Brown feared never materialized, at least in regards to the combat deployment, as the National Assembly approved the agreement quickly.^[52] Although Japanese normalization was, as expected, highly controversial, there was no spillover effect and likely would not have been regardless of the details of the deal.^[53] To South Koreans, Japanese normalization was the prominent issue.^[54] Essentially, Brown's error was assuming that the agreements were automatically related, with his mistake costing his country valuable concessions and setting a precedent for future exploitation.

The Americans continued to make more mistakes in negotiating the second deployment. Park appeared favorable to sending more troops, and the ROK's Prime Minister confirmed to Brown that Park was prepared to send a second division.^[55] Park, the prime minister said, wished to consult with a high ranking American – but only for purposes of public appearance. The administration then had Humphrey visit Korea, who also found that Park “anxious to be of greater help in Vietnam.”^[56] So, while Park did face actual anti-war opposition at this time, given the perceived benefits, he clearly desired an agreement regardless of any domestic concerns.

Despite this, the U.S. made another crucial error that allowed Park to take advantage once again. Following his visit, Humphrey boasted that he “made it quite clear to President Park and his government that there was no U.S. blank check... I urged that he make a specific proposal to our Ambassador so that we had something to talk about and some idea of what the Koreans wanted and needed”.^[57] By doing this, Humphrey allowed the South Koreans to again set the opening terms of the negotiations. Judging from his wish list from the first deployment, it should have been obvious to the U.S. that Park was going to continue making excessive demands, and that he was unafraid to call bluffs. The U.S.'s previous concessions had already set a dangerous precedent ripe for exploitation: Park had learned from the prior negotiations that Johnson would blink first. Had Humphrey set some terms, he might have been able to limit the concessions. However, by deferring to Park, he effectively offered him the blank check that he claimed would not exist. The error was further exacerbated because negotiations appeared to be rushed on the American side.^[58] In a memo, Johnson's cabinet member, David Bell, mentioned that Brown needed authority to present a counter-proposal “by tomorrow” in order to complete negotiations before Park's departure.^[59] The American unwillingness to draw out the negotiations only weakened the Johnson administration's position.

When instructed to begin talks on a third division, Brown refused, claiming that they “were in danger of seeming to take the Koreans for granted” and that “[the Koreans] will wonder when and where this will end.”^[60] Brown, however, was wrong. Two events show that the American misperceptions and mistakes continued into the negotiations for the third deployment – even though that deployment never occurred.

First, the ROK defense minister, not knowing Brown's plea, broached the issue of additional troops shortly after, thus revealing Park's willingness to send more units to Vietnam.^[61] Although the U.S. did not commit to this idea, Johnson sent advisors to negotiate another combat deployment later on, to which Park claimed that the U.S. could depend on him to send more soldiers once his political climate stabilized.^[62] Even though he would not negotiate for a combat deployment at the time, he also did not want the negotiations to end any time soon. Brown's concerns, again, were misinformed, and mistakes like these had potentially drastic consequences in terms of leverage. If the Johnson administration felt that Park was unlikely to agree to a deal, then they would be more likely to offer as much as

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possible in order to persuade him; Park's noncommittal tactics only added to this sentiment. Although it may not have made much tangible difference in this particular situation, this and similar misperceptions were why Park extracted so much out of the negotiations. Park wanted to continue receiving benefits throughout the war, and, in hindsight, any assumptions otherwise were a mistake.

Also, even after Park's increased security focus following an assassination attempt, he sent a proposal for yet another deployment with exorbitant demands.^[63] This idea, however, had virtually no support from the National Assembly, indicating that the proposal was another one of Park's efforts to reap benefits. It also offers credence to the idea that Park would have settled for less than he received in the earlier agreements if needed. Park was now offering to send troops against the wishes of the National Assembly, suggesting his earlier position – that his wishes were circumscribed by his political realities – was just a bargaining tactic. Meanwhile, the National Assembly had been a constant cause for concern for the U.S., with numerous administration concerns over perceived mounting opposition to troop deployments within the ROK.^[64] Park had clearly exploited the National Assembly issue to great effect.

While misperceptions were the most prominent factor in allowing Park to reap such extensive rewards, the political climate at the time is also relevant to understanding the events that transpired. There was nothing inevitable about the extent of U.S. military commitment in Vietnam. International allies did not compel American leaders to escalate the war; in fact, key countries such as Britain and France were opposed to escalation.^[65] Furthermore, U.S. presidents never saw a high likelihood of success for America. Both Johnson and Kennedy made private statements indicating their doubts, with Johnson commenting in 1964 that “the more I stayed awake last night thinking of this thing... it looks to me like we're getting into another Korea.”^[66]

Despite his private doubts, Johnson willingly escalated the war and thus felt he needed allies, leading to his future concessions to Park. These thoughts stemmed from Eisenhower's decision not to get involved in the region, as Eisenhower had noted that none of his typical allies were interested and it was unwise to fight alone.^[67] Unfortunately, Johnson took this to mean that he needed to get allies on his side for Vietnam, rather than the more obvious conclusion that, since so few of his allies were interested, he should not be getting more involved either. Due to the failures of the “More Flags” program, Johnson was left with few options to receive support.

The More Flags program, unveiled in 1964, primarily sought nonmilitary aid for South Vietnam from as many free world nations as possible, but it had a more underlying goal of demonstrating international formal support for America's Vietnam War policy.^[68] Thus, at its heart, the program was geared toward public relations rather than tangible aid. Unfortunately, the program was a massive failure. By December of 1964, only 15 allies were sending assistance, and of these, only six offered significant help.^[69] Extreme efforts by the U.S. to increase free world support accomplished little, as there were numerous examples of vague token gestures such as “medical supplies”, many of which were offered for entirely different reasons or enticed by full U.S. financing.^[70] Due to the worldwide lack of support, Johnson was forced to pivot, directing his attention to the few allies who were interested and requesting more from them, increasingly in the form of active military aid. Of course, even for the few countries willing to provide significant combat aid, it came at a price. Given his interest in war escalation and faced with few politically desirable alternatives, Johnson was forced to negotiate for troops.

Because of South Korea's ambitious interest, along with the aforementioned issues with accepting Taiwan's help, the ROK was quickly viewed as the most willing suitor.^[71] While a few other countries provided combat help as well, none were prepared to commit as many troops as South Korea. Therefore, even when negotiations with Park turned costly, Johnson had no other options given the hole he dug himself into and his insistence on not appearing alone in the region. Although his impatient negotiating was strategically poor, Johnson's hand was forced. The failures of the “More Flags” program left Johnson without alternate options to receive the international support he felt he desperately needed.

As some historians have been quick to note, the war's later years saw a decline in South Korea's diplomatic dominance. Subtle hints of what was to come were evident even in 1966, as North Korean incursions across the border led to South Korean plans to retaliate.^[72] After hearing the rumors, American warnings to Park were ignored,

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and the retaliation led to another North Korean incursion, this time killing U.S. soldiers. While indicating that the U.S. would stand by its ally, Johnson also made it clear that he would abide by the terms of the armistice, despite the ROK's calls for retaliation.^[73] By doing so in the aftermath of a "totally unjustified murder," Johnson set a precedent that he would refuse to break following future events.^[74] Fighting along the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea continued to rise, until two incidents in January 1968 brought U.S./ROK negotiations for a third combat deployment to a halt.

On January 21, 1968, North Korean commandos attempted to assassinate Park, making it to within 100 meters of the Blue House before their plans were exposed. Then, just two days later, the *USS Pueblo* was captured by North Korean forces.^[75] Both Park and Johnson were angered by the events, but they had vastly different reactions. To Park, immediate military retaliation was justified, but Johnson continued to see Vietnam as his main concern and called for restraint and dialogue with North Korea.^[76] Johnson felt that the risk of retaliation was not worth the reward, later claiming that he did not want to "win the argument but lose the sale."^[77] The U.S.'s safe position, and perceived lack of interest in regards to the assassination attempt, only further infuriated Park. He was described as "almost irrationally obsessed with [the] need to strike now at North Koreans," and the Johnson administration scrambled to take all feasible preventive measures.^[78] Growing tired of the lack of action, Park continued to suggest allied strikes and stressed to American leaders that "there's a limit to [his] patience and self restraint".^[79]

Unfortunately for Park, the Johnson administration viewed the events as a distraction, and was more concerned with the ROK's actions than those of its Northern aggressors. From Johnson's perspective, the main fear was a second Korean war caused, this time, by South Korean retaliation rather than North Korean attacks. American officials were skeptical of the assassination attempt, especially when one captured North Korean officer spoke with a South Korean accent.^[80] The Americans worried that Park's actions were based on emotion rather than reason, and refused to allow the ROK to escalate the conflict. While U.S. leadership did make a genuine effort to placate Park, the closest he ever got to an agreement on retaliation was a "willingness for later meetings on the question of infiltration."^[81] Park ultimately acceded to Johnson's demands to avoid retaliation (\$100 million in further aid helped), but the rift had grown; the leader felt betrayed, and viewed these events as a wake-up call to his country's security vulnerabilities, later denying the third request for troops for this reason.^[82] This forced the countries to cancel plans at a critical juncture, and the limitations of Park's relationship with the U.S. were exposed.

This initial rift widened under the Nixon administration, creating the basis for the failures emphasized by historians analyzing the Vietnam War alliance. From the start, Park viewed Nixon with anxiety and suspicion, and Nixon quickly reneged on a private promise to exempt the ROK from the provisions of the Nixon Doctrine.^[83] He began heavily reducing forces in both Vietnam and South Korea, and by the end of 1972 there were more ROK troops in Vietnam than Americans in either country.^[84] Ironically, Park's extraordinary success worked against him in later years, as his demands for further funding were undercut by his economic achievements. When Congress discovered the mercenary nature of the combat agreements, prominent members, such as Senators William Symington and William Fulbright, questioned why they were giving South Korea so much money.^[85] Many politicians began to view the country as a top candidate for economic and military cuts. Park's regime felt neglected by Nixon, and even Nixon's ambassadors thought he was being unnecessarily cold by choosing not to share vital information with the ROK leadership.^[86] Rapprochement between the U.S. and China only further exacerbated the chasm: it was a betrayal and a public relations disaster for Park, who declared a state of emergency in response while falsely using North Korea as the justification.^[87] Due to the spending cuts and worsening relations, these years are typically categorized as both the downfall of the wartime alliance and Park's fortunes more broadly.

In analyzing the alliance's downfall, historians blame Park not simply due to the events themselves, but also because of his poor reactions to them. For example, Vice President Spiro Agnew did attempt to offer Park \$1.5 billion as compensation for U.S. troop withdrawals, but Park shrewdly realized that Congress would not approve.^[88] Unfortunately, his response, after berating Agnew for the non-guaranteed offer, was to then attempt to bribe key American officials to support ROK objectives in what was later known as "Koreagate."^[89] More generally, Park was described as emotional, infuriated, and offensive on numerous occasions.^[90] In the meeting with Agnew, Park repeatedly made statements such as "tell the President..." which was perceived as ignorant and rude by the coldly formal U.S. leader.^[91] Park's previous successes worked against him here as well; he had a personal relationship

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with Johnson and received concessions without congressional knowledge/approval, so he had a hard time accepting that the new administration would not do the same. Thus, his behavior, along with the events themselves, is at the heart of many scholarly critiques. However, this paper argues that such criticisms are clouded by Park's behavioral tendencies, as, while the leader was emotional, this emotionality had little effect. Despite his behavior, Park tended to ultimately make the rational decision.

While Park was often furious at Nixon, he knew he could not afford to completely sever the alliance and he remained sensitive to American needs. Park's planned declaration of martial law, in response to U.S./Chinese rapprochement, would have criticized Nixon's foreign policy, causing American ambassador Philip Habib to tell him that the government would refrain from openly criticizing Park's authoritarian measures if he removed the criticism.^[92] To Habib's surprise, Park agreed, exemplifying a common theme: in return for Park's international obedience, Nixon consistently overlooked his domestic abuses. While Nixon's administration privately concluded that Park was a dictator, Nixon publicly told the ROK that "unlike other presidents, I do not intend to interfere in the internal affairs of your country."^[93] Nixon also overlooked Park's attempt at bribing American leaders, negating Park's one potentially drastic mistake. Therefore, Park's emotionality, while accurate, was over-emphasized because it had little tangible effect on his precarious situation. Furthermore, his emotions and lack of success in later years obscure the fact that he was relatively successful in leveraging troop withdrawal and reunification to get all he could out of the remainder of the war.

Although the U.S. had an increasingly small need for South Korean troops in Vietnam in the years following the Nixon Doctrine, Park still utilized what little leverage he had to temporarily alleviate his country's security concerns. He did this by linking his own troop withdrawal in Vietnam to U.S. withdrawal in South Korea.^[94] President Nixon, interested in discussing peace talks with North Vietnam, still needed the ROK to maintain a presence in South Vietnam in order to back up his pressure on the North. By delaying his withdrawal, Park was able to secure military and financial assistance along with a continued U.S. presence in Vietnam.^[95] This was purely a short term solution, but so was the ROK's military support: as soon as the U.S. signed its peace agreement, South Korea recalled the rest of its troops. The peace agreement signaled the end of the ROK's ever decreasing leverage, which was already in serious decline at that point. Park's threats had little credibility, because if he actually went through with them, he would have nothing left to leverage.^[96] Still, he was relatively successful with the small bargaining chip he possessed.

More impressively, Park created another bargaining chip out of thin air with the topic of reunification. Park used dialogue with the North as nothing more than further leverage to prevent demobilization, stressing the need for continued U.S. support in order to negotiate from a position of strength.^[97] According to him, if uncertainty over U.S. military assistance arose, reunification talks would quickly deadlock as a result.^[98] American officials took the bait, considering the opportunity worth waiting for even if it meant putting plans to reduce their military presence in South Korea on hold.^[99] Assistant Secretary Marshall Green, filling in for Nixon, reassured Park that the U.S. "would continue to do what it could to help the ROK negotiate from strength."^[100] As with the ROK troop withdrawal, it was a short term solution, but his efforts to extract further benefits out of Nixon contradict the narrative that the end of the war was a failure.

Negative accounts of the alliance in later years also ignore the fact that military disengagement was a largely mutual decision. Following the assassination attempt and *Pueblo* crisis, Seoul, not Washington, made the decision not to send more troops to Vietnam.^[101] Park heavily valued his country's security, but the U.S. had always stopped short of offering a NATO-type security pact in order to prevent South Korea from pulling them into more war. As a result, Park's mounting distrust was warranted and unalleviated, and, following the events of 1968, he felt that the U.S. was no longer providing sufficient support.^[102] Due to the benefits Park had already received, he had less reason to fear the inevitable U.S. troop withdrawal in South Korea, and North Korean events made future combat agreements no longer worth the growing public criticism. The decision was, at the very least, understandable given the country's priorities.

Largely forgotten in the discussion of the later years of the wartime alliance is that the U.S. continued helping even outside the realm of specific agreements. Although the U.S. was unwilling to permanently commit to a military alliance with the ROK, it continued aiding South Korea against North Korea even as disengagement continued. The countries

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worked together to make DMZ attacks more difficult, using electronic sensors, defoliants, and erecting a chain-link fence, amongst other means.^[103] Nixon also implied through his speeches that he would have tolerated Park's increasing authoritarianism to some extent regardless, again proving that Park's behavior did not further harm the allies' relationship.^[104] Thus, the ROK's supposed failures towards the end of the alliance are exaggerated. More importantly, they were ultimately inconsequential given the lasting effects of the earlier combat agreements.

Consideration of the short and long-term effects of the alliance reveal how Park stabilized his regime and altered South Korea's future for the better.^[105] The U.S.'s monetary aid had a drastic domestic effect on the Park regime itself, along with the lasting economic benefits which will be discussed later in this section. Early on, the regime was highly unstable, and upon review of the situation, the U.S. considered the regime at high risk for an attempted coup.^[106] However, a coup never occurred, and Park won re-election a few years later. Of course, correlation does not equal causation, but the alliance directly supported Park's stability, especially in the early years of the relationship. Internal U.S. documents responding to early negotiations specifically referenced Korean stabilization, and a follow-up from South Korea listed several favorable economic developments stemming from U.S. loans, all under the title of economic stability.^[107] Record-breaking exports, large food imports, reversal of capital flight, and other factors were explicitly tied to the Park regime itself.

In addition to bolstering the economy of an unstable regime, the alliance was also a successful public relations campaign for both countries. The U.S. was more concerned with North Korea's political influence than its military, and ROK economic success helped deter the threat of communism domestically.^[108] While North Korea was still a constant thorn in the side of both countries, its political influence on South Korea and its civilians during these years was negligible, further stabilizing Park's rule at home.

The alliance also prompted the American government to excuse Park's increasingly undemocratic style, which he justified with reference to fixing his country's economic and political problems above all else.^[109] Under the eye of the Johnson administration, Park amended the constitution to allow himself to serve a third term as president, and continuously arrested his opposition.^[110] However, because of the alliance, Johnson tolerated Park's actions so as to maintain the ROK's stability. When Park declared martial law, Johnson's cabinet members agreed that the U.S. would simply respond that "invocation of martial law was [the] decision of Korean government."^[111] The lack of condemnation spoke volumes, as the implication was clear that the U.S. would stand by while Park used authoritarian measures to protect his regime. Publically, Johnson favored tolerance, and his cabinet did so privately as well, with one member actually stating that "instead of urging Pa[r]k... to be more democratic, maybe we ought to tolerate a little more dictatorship."^[112] Because undemocratic measures were tolerated to ensure ROK (and by extension, Park's) stability, the two factors were thus heavily linked. Given Park's relatively high level of stability throughout the combat agreement years, coupled with his subsequent downfall following the end of the war effort, the U.S.'s strategy was successful.^[113]

Park's stability was ultimately a short term result of the alliance, but the agreements also influenced the future of the nation as a whole. Most notably, the agreements' economic impact was undeniable. In all, the ROK received tens of billions of dollars in grants, loans, subsidies, technology transfers, and preferential markets, revitalizing its poor economy.^[114] Between 1960 and 1970, South Korean exports grew 26-fold. In 1960, the country was twice as import dependent as North Korea, but a decade later the tables had turned, as the ROK surpassed North Korea in terms of national economy, military strength, and international recognition.^[115] While military and economic aid were key, new market opportunities were also important, as earnings from commercial exports and services in Vietnam amounted to \$745 million by 1967.^[116]

While much of Park's success was of his own doing, luck had a bit to do with it as well, as the U.S.'s sudden authority over the direction of the South Korean economy caused Park to change his plans for the better. The ROK originally adopted a five year plan favoring import-substitution industrialization (ISI) via heavy investments in chemical industries, but this required U.S. economic support, and the Johnson administration favored export-oriented industrialization (EOI).^[117] The U.S. was able to leverage aid to influence Park, offering a package contingent upon the ROK's amendment of its plan to suit U.S. wishes.^[118] In response, Park amended the plan to favor EOI, which turned out in hindsight to be the right choice for the ROK.

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Similarly, South Korean normalization with Japan, which resulted in long-lasting economic benefits, would likely not have been accomplished without U.S. intervention. The U.S. encouraged normalization, even though South Koreans harbored a deep hatred toward the Japanese due to Japanese colonialism of the early 1900s.^[119] Despite American officials' aforementioned concerns on its effects over Park's political situation, they considered normalization to be a top priority due to the economic benefits it would bring to South Korea.^[120] Since Japan was able to offer billions in grants and loans, the Johnson administration heavily encouraged settlement talks. Johnson even considered offering money as incentive, essentially serving as a signing bonus, and decided to send a "high-level salesman" as a mediator to push for a deal.^[121] Ultimately, Park accepted Japan's offer, to the dismay of many citizens. Normalization paid great dividends, as it provided additional financial support and a new market for South Korean goods.^[122] However, both sides were more concerned with their alliance with the U.S. than each other, and Japan's offer, while strong, did not encompass all of the ROK's demands.^[123] Without American influence, the ROK likely would have never fully reaped the rewards.

While the events described had massive ramifications, one must also avoid implying that the Vietnam War was solely responsible for the ROK's current status as a relatively strong nation. The factors at play were broad, and the narrow lens of the Vietnam War captures only a small portion of the country's historically impactful decisions. Chaebols (business groups) in the 1970s had a strong influence on the ROK's current economic success.^[124] Powerful companies, such as Hyundai and Samsung, were largely controlled to the government and forced to pursue projects to stay in favor with the regime. These chaebols successfully invested in heavy industries and thus enhanced the nation's economy.^[125] More recently, Korean soft power has also improved drastically under governmental influence, spurred by the global popularity of its popular culture industry and representing another export success for the ROK.^[126] Therefore, while outside the realm of this paper, it is important to remember that many other factors impacted South Korea's current status as well. However, skepticism towards its extent should not detract from the overall success of the alliance in this regard.

Upon reading the title of this paper, many would consider it a reference to the relative power of the two countries involved: The U.S. as a hegemon, and the ROK as a young nation in dire need of support. However, the facts depict a different story. Park's negotiating, combined with American misperceptions and the circumstances surrounding their decision-making, tilted the negotiations heavily in favor of the ROK. While Park did have comparative lack of success under the Nixon regime, the common narrative of later failure has been exaggerated by scholars, and he had already extracted both short term and lasting benefits by this point. Thus, the relationship the two countries was truly uneven; just, not in the ways one would expect.

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Notes

[1] The term alliance, within the context of this paper, refers to the two countries' agreements and cooperation throughout the Vietnam War period, rather than their more general diplomatic relations.

[2] Min-Yong Lee, *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). 403-429.

[3] Bruce Cumings' *Korea's Place in the Sun*, considered to be an all-encompassing account of South Korean 20th century history, barely mentions the agreements.

[4] Glenn Baek's account of the alliance is particularly egregious in this regard, pointing out Park's failures while largely ignoring his many early successes. Baek also erroneously depicts Park's decision to help as "desperate", even though the ROK government had sought to ally itself with the U.S. dating back to the Rhee regime. (Glenn Baek, Park Chung-hee's Vietnam Odyssey: A Study in Management of the U.S.-ROK Alliance." *Korean journal of defense analysis* 25, no. 2 (2013): 147-170.)

[5] According to Min-Yong Lee, the ROK received numerous lasting benefits, such as economic improvement, increased military capabilities, and increased influence in international affairs. (Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 405.)

[6] Nicholas Sarantakes' work on the 1965-1968 deployments finds that Park gained concessions from the first combat agreement due to both his negotiating style and American miscalculations. Unfortunately, Sarantakes fails to

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recognize the Johnson administration's similar mistakes throughout the alliance. (Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "In the Service of Pharaoh? The United States and the Deployment of Korean Troops in Vietnam, 1965-1968," *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (1999): 425-449.)

[7] Robert Blackburn's work on the failures of the More Flags program, along with Fredrik Logevall's focus on Johnson's underlying political values, help explain the American factors of which Park was able to take advantage. (Robert Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "more flags": the hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994). 3-70.)

[8] Tae Kwak reveals that President Nixon viewed the ROK as too strong to continue needing support, so he reduced aid and removed troops from both South Korea and Vietnam. He also depicted Park as emotionally volatile, but, despite this, Park still acted rationally and continued to benefit as the relationship between the two countries soured. (Tae Yang Kwak, "The Nixon Doctrine and the Yusin Reforms: American Foreign Policy, the Vietnam War and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Korea." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 12, no. 1/2 (2003): 33-57.)

[9] Sarantakes finds that Park decided to stop sending combat troops to Vietnam due to security concerns. His research on the Korean border also notes that, even after the agreements ended, the U.S. still helped combat North Korea. (Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "The Quiet War: Combat Operations Along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, 1966-1969." *The Journal of Military History* 64, no. 2 (2000): 439.

[10] Along with Lee's listed benefits, Tadashi Kimiya finds that the U.S. heavily influenced the ROK due to the alliance, successfully encouraging economic goals which aligned with U.S. priorities and stabilizing Park's regime. Tadashi Kimiya, *Reassessing the Park Chung Hee Era, 1961-1979: Development, Political Thought, Democracy & Cultural Influence* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

[11] Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 405.

[12] Rhee used the containment of communist expansion as his reasoning, but his underlying motives were clear. (Ibid)

[13] Ibid., 406

[14] Ibid.

[15] Kimiya, *Reassessing Park*, 76.

[16] Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 409.

[17] Blackburn, *More Flags*, 41.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 43

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 45

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[25] Ibid., 44

[26] Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 412.

[27] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 434.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Blackburn, *More Flags*, 49.

[30] Sarantakes claimed that "when the meeting ended, Park had outplayed a master of the political deal at his own game". (Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 434.)

[31] Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 413.

[32] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 438.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Blackburn, *More Flags*, 49.

[37] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 445.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Baek, "Vietnam Odyssey," 163.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 429.

[42] "Cable regarding possible political repercussions in South Korea if that country decides to deploy troops to fight," April 15, 1965, "U.S. Declassified Documents Online" accessed March 13, 2017 [Hereafter U.S. Declassified]

[43] "Memorandum of Conversation," May 12, 1965, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea" accessed March 8, 2017 [Hereafter FRUS.]

[44] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 435.

[45] The agreement, establishing diplomatic relations, was unpopular due to Japanese colonialism of the early 1900s. (Kimiya, *Reassessing Park*, 70.)

[46] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 435.

[47] Ibid., 436

[48] Ibid., 427

[49] Interestingly, Sarantakes also over-simplifies the situation, as the ROK had been trying to reach a combat

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agreement for years. Presenting it as if Japanese normalization was what ultimately made Park push for a deal is a misrepresentation of Korean politics, just as he accused Brown of doing. (Ibid.)

[50] "Memorandum from Secretary of State Rusk to President Johnson," May 17, 1965, FRUS.

[51] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 428.

[52] Ibid., 436.

[53] It was also unclear if the combat agreement helped with the other treaty, as the debate became so heated that the opposition government resigned in protest. That said, it certainly did not add to Park's existing issues like Brown claimed. (Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 434.)

[54] Ibid., 414.

[55] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 438.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., 439

[58] Memorandum From the Administrator of the Agency for International Development (Bell) to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) January 25, 1966, FRUS.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 442.

[61] Baek, "Vietnam Odyssey," 147-170.

[62] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 442.

[63] Blackburn, *More Flags*, 64.

[64] Summary of U.S. positions on negotiating economic assistance package with South Korea and South Korea sending troops to South Vietnam," January 25, 1966, U.S. Declassified.

[65] Logevall, "Presidential Address," 1-15.

[66] Robert Dallek, "Three New Revelations About LBJ." *The Atlantic*. April 01, 1998.

[67] Blackburn, *More Flags*, 5.

[68] Ibid., 11

[69] Ibid., 22

[70] Ibid., 27

[71] Ibid., 26.

[72] Sarantakes, "Quiet War," 441.

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[73] Ibid., 442.

[74] Ibid., 444.

[75] Ibid., 448.

[76] Ibid., 449.

[77] Johnson, *Vantage Point*, 536.

[78] "Telegram From the Commander in Chief, United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp)." February 9, 1968, FRUS.

[79] Sarantakes, "Quiet War," 450.

[80] Ibid., 498.

[81] "Memorandum From President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson." January 28, 1968, FRUS.

[82] Sarantakes, "Quiet War," 453.

[83] Kwak, "Yusin Reforms," 34.

[84] Ibid., 35.

[85] Ibid., 42.

[86] "Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State.", May 19, 1972, FRUS.

[87] Kwak, "Yusin Reforms," 49.

[88] Ibid., 47.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid., 53.

[93] Ibid., 55.

[94] Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 422.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., 424.

[97] Kwak, "Yusin Reforms," 52.

[98] "Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State.", July 7, 1972, FRUS.

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[99] Albeit to a limited extent, as U.S. officials privately discussed the need to move on regardless at a certain point. (Kwak, "Yusin Reforms," 52.)

[100] Park's bitterness over rapprochement was also evident, as he commented that "President Nixon must be tired after his strenuous efforts during the recent trips to Peking and Moscow". Green responded that the President "is in excellent health" and is "the kind of man who is reinvigorated by such travels". (Korea/State, July 7, 1972, FRUS.)

[101] Sarantakes, "Service of Pharaoh," 447.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid., 444,

[104] Kwak, "Yusin Reforms," 43.

[105] Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 405-429.

[106] Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense McNamara," September 21, 1964, FRUS.

[107] "Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant to President Johnson," May 1, 1964, FRUS.

[108] Kimiya, *Reassessing Park*, 74.

[109] Park Chung Hee, *Our Nation's Path: Ideology of Social Reconstruction* (Seoul: Hollym Corporation, 1970.) 1-30

[110] Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 419.

[111] "Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State", June 3, 1964, FRUS.

[112] "Memorandum from Robert Komer of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant," March 26, 1964, FRUS.

[113] Park only came into power in 1961 due to a military coup, and he was assassinated amidst mounting instability in 1979, six years after the Paris Peace Accords. (Lee, *Park Chung Hee*, 403-429.)

[114] Kwak, "Yusin Reforms," 40-50.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Kimiya, *Reassessing Park*, 70.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] By ensuring that the ROK improved economically through other means, the U.S. would also feel less pressure to support South Korea themselves, although their combat agreement concessions rendered this point moot. (Ibid.)

[121] "Memorandum from Robert Komer of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant," June 3, 1967, FRUS.

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[122] The ROK received a total of \$800 million in return for the establishment of basic diplomatic relations. (Kimiya, *Reassessing Park*, 74.)

[123] Ibid.

[124] Clifford, Mark. "Chaebol," *Troubled Tiger: Businessmen, Bureaucrats, and Generals in South Korea*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1994: 113-125.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Nam, Siho. "The cultural political economy of the Korean Wave in East Asia: implications for cultural globalization theories," *Asian Perspective* 37.2 (Summer 2013).

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