

The Evolution of the South Korean-United States Alliance

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The picture that graces the cover of *The Evolution of the South Korean-United States Alliance* aptly depicts the United States and South Korea as two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, their shape a perfect match; the colors of the two pieces—representing their respective national flags, however, a disturbing clash. This suggests the overall goals of the alliance to be a more consistent fit than the inner content which at times has evolved in contrasting directions. Heo and Roehrig, who accept the twists and turns of the alliance as natural, trace the developments of US-South Korean relations from October 1953, when the two states signed the Mutual Defense Treaty. In examining the relations over the seven decades that followed they ambitiously set out to develop a “comprehensive study that addresses history, economics, security, alliance structure, politics, and the future of the alliance” (p. 10). Their extensive discussions on these topics consistently present the traditional conservative line of this history.

The framework of their treatment is established in Chapter 1 where Heo and Roehrig offer an extensive discussion on alliance theory. Here they introduce several definitions of alliance, all of which carry a military or defense

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tone. The following by Robert E. Osgood is most comprehensive. He explains an alliance as a formal agreement that pledges states to co-operate in using their military resources against a specific state or states and usually obligates one or more of the signatories to use force, or to consider—unilaterally or in consultation with allies—the use of force, in specified circumstances (p. 19).¹

Alliance tend to evolve in concert with changes in the signatories' interests and circumstances, as the authors later demonstrate through the US-South Korean alliance. The latter's economic development and military growth since 1953 has allowed it to assume a more responsible position in the alliance. On the other hand, the success of the democratization movement has often challenged the alliance as social liberation allowed the people of South Korea space to express their views on their country's relations with the United States more freely but also with greater diversity.

Their decision to link the birth of the alliance with the post-Korean War Mutual Defense Treaty might raise discussion. How was this treaty different in significance from the initial agreement that the two states signed in 1882? Was there not a similar understanding from 1948, with the birth of the Republic of Korea? Heo and Roehrig argue that the 1953 treaty signified the first time that the United States interpreted South Korea's strategic location as important to US security and thus warranted a more formal statement of its commitment to the state (p. 63). The timing of the agreement they see as critical in its signaling to South Korean President Syngman Rhee the United States' commitment to protect his country should it again become enflamed in war. The cease-fire agreement that the US had just signed with China and North Korea did not signal, as Rhee feared, its abandonment of the country it had fought so hard to protect.

Yet, Article III of the Mutual Defense Treaty appended an escape clause to the declaration that an "armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties. . . would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger." The addition of "in accordance with its constitutional processes" potentially freed the US from actively joining

1. Osgood (1968, 17).

peninsular battles. Its inclusion may also have had the intended purpose of circumventing criticism similar to that which the US endured when it allegedly ignored a promise included in a 1882 treaty to “exert good offices [if] other Powers deal unjustly or oppressively with either Government.”² The authors dismiss the importance of this article, which appeared as Article 1 in the earlier agreement, by explaining it as “merely a formality of diplomatic nicety that was contained in most treaties of this sort” (p. 51). The Koreans evidently did not share this understanding. Their criticism of the US for not intervening when Korea faced Japanese imperial intrusions heightened during the Pacific War, and continued even after its liberation in 1945.³

The chapters that follow survey the important events that defined the alliance over the long decades of the Cold War and its aftermath. Presidents from both sides came and went, but the alliance remained stable due to common interests the two countries shared in displaying a unified strength to discourage the North from contemplating a second attack south. However, North Korean harassment and attacks continued, which resulted in strategic adjustments in the United States-South Korea relationship. Heo and Roehrig append a sample list of the more than 750 infiltrations by the North between 1950 and 2017 (pp. 131, 272–78), all violations of the cease-fire terms of July 1953. Though a useful tabulation, the list itself, along with a general conclusion that assigns near total blame to the North, raises more questions than answers, particularly when competing research attributes blame for Armistice infractions in a more balanced manner—both sides contributing to the friction along this volatile divide. Far from absolving the North from blame, or even attempting to calculate which side was more the victim, a primary question might consider how actions by either side influenced counter reactions from the other. Might US actions in South Korea have encouraged North Korea’s threatening actions?

One such example of an adjustment in the US-South Korean alliance

2. Text for the 1882 treaty taken from Kim (1966, 238–41).

3. Syngman Rhee reminded American Ambassador John Muccio by claiming that South Korea had been betrayed by two Roosevelts: Theodore when the US did not assist Korea against Japan in 1905 under his presidency, and Franklin in 1945 by “pushing for a trusteeship administration” at the Yalta conference. See US Office of the Historian (1949).

that surely caused aggressive responses by North Korea was the US's 1958 deployment in South Korea of as many as 950 nuclear weapons (see chart, p. 76). Heo and Roehrig explain this deployment as necessary to prevent "another rapid assault across the DMZ before North Korean forces overran US positions early in an invasion..." The weapons being cheaper than maintaining military troops, were also justified as a cost saving measure (pp. 73–74). However, the negative consequences cannot be ignored. Deployment of the weapons also raised the tensions along the DMZ, and increased North Korean desires to obtain its own nuclear force, which it finally did from the early 2000s. The US did—albeit unilaterally—abrogate the paragraph of the Armistice Agreement that prohibited the introduction of new weapons on the peninsula, save for piece-for-piece replacement. However, the introduction of nuclear weapons can only be seen as a violation of the spirit of the cease-fire agreement that the US had just recently signed. The extent to which this non-negotiated adjustment encouraged North Korean violations cannot be measured, nor can it be ignored.⁴ Additionally, US troop levels, at one point reaching over 60,000, constituted another violation in there exceeding the 35,000 limit that the Armistice Agreement placed on peninsular-based foreign troops. While Heo and Roehrig are correct to indicate North violations, a more balanced presentation would recognize those by the US-South Korea alliance, as well. Rather than just the negative side, it is also important to remember that positive gestures have also been answered with positive responses. One example is the exchange that occurred after George H.W. Bush in 1991 announced the US intention to remove nuclear weapons from the peninsula. In return, North Korea agreed to allow for IAEA inspections and later signed the Agreed Framework with the United States to curb its nuclear program.

Heo and Roehrig further credit the South Korean democratization movement that gained momentum from 1987 with creating a major turning point in the alliance. Its success bestowed blessings upon the alliance by drawing US and South Korean politics and values into closer proximity. At the same

4. For discussion on North Korea's reaction to a nuclearized South Korea see Mazarr (1995, 20–21).

time, democratization brought “new elites to power who sometimes had different views from the United States” in certain vital areas, such as in relations with North Korea. Post-democratization South Korea also released a flood of opinions on the United States, some rather negative, that pre-democratization dictatorships succeeded in suppressing (p. 81).

Democratization can only be interpreted as a positive development for South Koreans who suffered decades of human rights abuses at the hands of dictators that enjoyed cover by the alliance. Heo and Roehrig argue that the US did try to intervene on the people’s behalf. For example, it did warn South Korean presidents, such as Chun Doo-hwan, to refrain from “excessive force when dealing with the demonstrators” (p. 96). They quote former US Ambassador to South Korea, William Gleysteen, as recalling that the “United States did not approve the use of military force and was stunned by the result” (p. 96). Though they balance this incredulous statement with a recollection by a Gwangju-based reporter, Tim Shorrock, who maintains that the troops in question were under US control (p. 96), their bottom line on this rather lengthy discussion on the Gwangju tragedy is a rather timid conclusion that the “US sided with security over promoting political liberalization” (p. 99). How palatable is this for Koreans who suffered at this time to explain their personal sacrifice as necessary for their country’s national security?

The authors also acknowledge the important role that economics has played in the alliance, though not to the extent that they attribute to security issues. Heo and Roehrig adequately trace transitions from the early years of the alliance which saw the US finance South Korea through grants and loans to protect its “economic lifeline” (p. 163), to the development years when US presidents confronted their South Korean counterpart on the high trade developments that his country enjoyed, leading to more recent times when South Korea developed to assume a position amongst the strongest economies in the world. The “economic miracle” that South Korea experienced has traditionally been explained as a product of the Park Chung-hee regime, a conclusion that Heo and Roehrig support in citing South Korea’s first five-year plan of 1962 as the energy behind this advancement. The country’s economy also benefited from the Park administration reaching agreement with Japan (1965) and its participation in

the Vietnam War by selling the US war-related equipment and dispatching troops (Ch. 5). An alternative line of thinking credits Syngman Rhee's role. Was Park's "export substitution" approach possible if not for Rhee pushing "import substitution?"⁵

An important advancement resulting from South Korean economic development was its rise to assume a position as one of the United States' most important trading partners. However, as with other Asian "miracles," South Korea's increased trade with the United States resulted in near annual trade surpluses, particularly between 1994–1997, but a trade deficit in 1998, the year following South Korea's financial crisis (p. 175). Disputes over trade issues, such as the auto exports to the US, caused friction in the alliance, and encouraged South Korea to diversify its trading partners to include former communist enemies in the Soviet Union/Russia Federation and China. Trading between the two allies was strengthened from 2012 by the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) they successfully negotiated. The authors also acknowledge that certain sectors also protested the agreement. Korean farmers, for example, suffered from the agriculture markets that the FTA opened to foreign competitors. The authors argue that dissenters ignore the positive results that the FTA introduced, such as the increased opportunities that South Korean automobiles, electronic goods, and the like have enjoyed (pp. 181–82). More recently, the FTA has faced a renewed challenge in the present Trump administration threatening to renegotiate this "horrible deal" (p. 195).

Turning to the future, Heo and Roehrig consider the effects of recent changes on the position of peninsular-based US troops, particularly drawing readers' attention to issues involving troop operation control. To what extent should the United States maintain control over deployment of not only its own troops, but South Korean troops as well? Operational Control has been recently addressed, and amended, in formal circles. These changes stop short of granting the home country unconditional control over even its own forces, which it is still required to return to the United States control under wartime conditions. The threat of war by the volatile North Korean situation, as well as concerns

5. For South Korean economic development see Amsden (1989), and Woo-Cumings (1991).

over this state's potential collapse, factor into decisions that prevent the South Korean military from assuming unconditional troop control. The authors argue that South Korean advancements in economic and defense circles have placed its military in a position to soon assume complete Operational Control, even under wartime conditions (p. 236). Time will tell if this predication materializes accordingly.

The United States presence on the peninsula, both in number of troops and in influence, has dropped in recent years, which necessitated reconsideration of the Status of Forces Agreement. This the two states completed in 2001. Yet all has not progressed smoothly. By this agreement the US promised to clean up environmental pollution in abandoned camp areas. However, the authors cite a study showing that of 31 of these military sites as many as 23 remain contaminated by chemical pollutants (p. 207). A more comprehensive concern is the future of the remaining US troops on the Korean peninsula. Would a stronger, more secure, South Korea—coupled with problems connected with their presence—one day return all the remaining US troops from the peninsula? Have they, as Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute has argued, “outlived [their] usefulness” (p. 209)? Heo and Roehrig beg to differ. They argue that the forces remain “an important element of the regional status quo and demonstrate a broader commitment to peace and stability in Asia” (p. 209).

The authors raise several issues that require further contemplation. One such issue is their dating of the alliance, whether the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty is an adequate starting point. It may be argued that even if not a formal alliance, the history of Korean-United States relations requires a more dedicated analysis to contextualize the formal relations they nurtured during, and after, the Cold War. Also, as noted above, a truly comprehensive understanding of the alliance would benefit from a more balanced treatment of South Korean-US interactions with the Soviet Union-North Korean alliance. One issue that connects these two concerns is the critical but failed, US-USSR Joint Commission talks of 1946–1947. The authors' contention that “the Soviets were committed to the permanent division of the country” (p. 56) is not supported by documentation of these meetings. Rather, primary and secondary documentation find areas where both sides share responsibility for this failure. Perhaps there were those

in the North and the Soviet Union who favored division over unification. Yet, the South also had people of influence—among both Americans and Koreans—set on establishing a separate South Korean regime. The Commission's failure, however, formally cemented division and increased dramatically the probability of civil war. Though outside the time frame of the alliance, this discussion establishes a pattern repeated throughout the volume where the authors generally side with the South Korean-US alliance in its conflicts with the enemy North Korean/Soviet alliance.

The Evolution of the South Korean-United States Alliance does provide an adequate survey of this alliance, tracing its development with evolving interests and capabilities of primarily South Korea, but to a lesser—yet no less important degree—of the United States. Their focus being primarily on security, and their vision directed primarily from a South Korean perspective, requires supplementary reading to empower students with a more comprehensive perspective. Strengthening Heo and Roehrig's treatment of the alliance with those that reflect first on earlier issues from the onset of US-Korean relations, as well as those that offer a less traditional voice on post-Korean War relations, would provide students with the historical context and diversity they need to understand the alliance more comprehensively. *The Evolution of the South Korean-United States Alliance* serves as a springboard from which to build this discussion.

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