

## The Forgotten Soldiers: Unraveling the U.S.-South Korea Relations in Shaping Korean Military Involvement in the Vietnam War

Zhenwei Gao, Stanford University

### Abstract

*This essay investigates South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War, examining its dual motivations of geopolitical dependency on the United States and economic interests. Under President Park Chung-hee, approximately 220,000 soldiers were deployed as part of the U.S.'s More Flags initiative, reflecting South Korea's role in supporting American anti-communist objectives. The following analysis delves into the brutal actions of these troops and the paradox of South Korea, a former colonized nation, adopting the role of a "colonized colonizer." Finally, it underscores the complexities of military engagement, identity, and the under-acknowledged legacy of violence against civilians, encapsulating the intricate dynamics of Cold War-era military and diplomatic strategies.*

Though the Korean War is often labeled as the “forgotten war” in the United States, the overlooked involvement of South Korean military forces in the Vietnam War— a conflict more prominently recognized in American history— represents another neglected episode in the annals of military chronicles. Specifically, from 1964 to 1973, under South Korean President Park Chung-hee's leadership and following U.S. President Lyndon Johnson's More Flags initiative, South Korea sent a formidable contingent of around 220,000 soldiers to Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> This force represented 9% of the total pro-American coalition forces in Vietnam, aiding the United States in its anti-communism war against the Northern Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.<sup>2</sup> Under American command, Korean soldiers engaged in a variety of operations, from combat against North Vietnamese forces to infrastructure development in South Vietnam. Their reputation for toughness made them so feared that the Viet Cong sought to avoid confrontations “unless a victory was certain.”<sup>3</sup> Further, these Korean troops were

---

<sup>1</sup> Jinim Park, “The Colonized Colonizers: Korean Experiences of the Vietnam War,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 7 (Jan. 1998): 219.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 224.

involved in around 80 massacres, resulting in 8,000 to 9,000 civilian deaths.<sup>4</sup> Yet these incidents have received less attention and are less documented.

Focusing on South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War, this essay seeks to examine how South Korea's historical relationship with the United States impacted its participation. Particularly, given South Korea's past as a colonized nation liberated by the Americans, this essay contends that the country's involvement with the Vietnam War was a direct result of its security and economic dependency on the U.S. Furthermore, it aims to demonstrate how the brutal reputation of South Korean soldiers in Vietnam was linked to anti-communist rhetoric reminiscent of the Korean War and compounded by the lack of accountability measures from their American commanders, who were often indifferent to the war crimes committed by the South Koreans. In exploring the influence of the United States on South Korea's involvement in Vietnam, the paper will further delve into the complex paradox of South Korean soldiers grappling with their identity as "colonized colonizers," and how the U.S.-South Korea partnership contributed to South Korea's post-war developments.

### **Korean War Trauma and South Korea's Geopolitical Insecurity**

Prior to the Vietnam War, the brutality and desperation of the Korean War were fresh in the minds of myriads of South Koreans.<sup>5</sup> The ceasefire agreement and the reinstatement of the 38th parallel brought a semblance of stability within the Korean Peninsula.<sup>6</sup> However, South Korea remained vulnerable, grappling with high casualties, a depleted military, and a devastated economy.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Byung-Kook Kim of Korea University writes that the South Korean elites had been especially worried that the U.S. would cease to protect South Korea if the country lost its geopolitical value to the U.S.'s regional security apparatus, or if domestic U.S. public opinion shifted dramatically.<sup>8</sup> Such fear of abandonment was not without reason. Three months after

---

<sup>4</sup> Hoang Do, "The Forgotten History of South Korean Massacres in Vietnam," *The Diplomat*, May 15, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> "An Unpromising Recovery: South Korea's Post-Korean War Economic Development: 1953-1961," Association for Asian Studies, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/an-unpromising-recovery-south-koreas-post-korean-war-economic-development-1953-1961/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 404-405.

the end of the Korean War, in October 1953, the Mutual Defense Treaty failed to include a promised “automatic response” that would have obligated immediate U.S. military intervention to protect South Korea against foreign adversaries.<sup>9</sup> This situation was compounded by a precipitous decrease in U.S. military aid: from an annual average of \$232 million from 1956–1961 to \$154 million from 1962–1965.<sup>10</sup> In South Korea’s view, the absence of a protective provision in the Mutual Defense Treaty left it vulnerable to the unpredictable opinions of the U.S. public, who generally regarded South Korea as an ally of limited strategic importance, unworthy of a robust security commitment.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the reduction in U.S. military aid was perceived as an indication of a waning U.S. military commitment, reflecting the perceived diminished strategic value of South Korea to the U.S. This decrease in aid, however, was a measure taken by the U.S. to address its increasing balance-of-payment issues and to manage its other financial commitments across the globe.<sup>12</sup>

Inevitably, South Korea was dependent upon the guarantee of security protection from the United States, and in such context, the deployment of South Korean soldiers to Vietnam became evidently political: to prevent the United States from redeploying its troops from South Korea to South Vietnam. It was against this backdrop of military insecurity that Park, along with economic considerations, decided to dispatch combat troops to South Vietnam in support of US President Lyndon B. Johnson’s More Flags war efforts, which allowed other countries such as South Korea, The Philippines, and Thailand to be involved in the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the continued guarantee of protection by American troops on-ground in South Korea, Park believed that participation in the Vietnam War would equip his country with a modern, combat-experienced armed force.<sup>14</sup> This, he hoped, would position South Korea as an indispensable strategic ally of the United States in its Cold War campaigns and serve as “an anchor in [the United States’s] Asia policy,” thereby gaining more support and respect from the United States and the international community.<sup>15</sup> While these political rationales were predominant, the decision was not devoid of economic considerations. Upon deciding to engage extensively in the Vietnam War, driven by

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Kim and Vogel, *The Park Chung Hee Era*, 409.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 404.

both military security and internal political factors, Park's focus increasingly turned towards earning economic support from the United States.

### **Economic Trade-offs: the Most Notable American Mercenaries in Vietnam**

By 1960, South Korea's GDP per capita was a mere \$79, one of the lowest in the world, reflecting the profound poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>16</sup> The industrial sector, contributing only 14.3% to the GDP in 1960, was embryonic, and the economy was predominantly agricultural, severely impacted by the war.<sup>17</sup> This period marked the beginning of South Korea's economic transformation under the leadership of Park Chung-hee, who seized power by a military coup in May 1961 during a particularly tumultuous revolutionary time in South Korea.<sup>18</sup> During his leadership, Park Chung-hee initiated a series of economic reforms that emphasized industrialization and export-led growth. Park, influenced by Japan's economic resurgence bolstered by its logistical support role during the Korean War, perceived South Korea's military participation in the Vietnam War as a strategic avenue to fortify relations with the United States and to garner economic aid and investment.<sup>19</sup>

According to historian Robert M. Blackburn, Seoul's publicly stated position for sending troops to Vietnam was to "repay those sixteen free nations that provided military aid during the Korean War."<sup>20</sup> However, in internal documents discovered by scholar Simeon Man, Kim Song-un, the South Korean Minister of National Defense stated that "the Vietnam War was the one and only golden market for the Korean government to export its unemployed men and manufactures."<sup>21</sup> So, to South Korean elites and its leader, Park Chung-hee, in addition to geopolitical security concerns, the Vietnam War presented an opportunity to achieve the dream of industrializing the nation through the securing of U.S. military aid, offshore contracts, and revenue from

---

<sup>16</sup> Young-Iob Chung, "Economic Development and Structural Changes: *South Korea in the Fast Lane: Economic Development and Capital Formation* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2007), chap. 2, 7-9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195325454.003.0002>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Simeon Man, *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (University of California Press, 2018), 109.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, N.C., 1994), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Man, *Soldiering Through Empire*, 109.

soldiers' labor, all to set the nation on a path to greater economic prosperity and influence in the region.<sup>22</sup>

However, Park's government also keenly understood that its domestic economic transformation was dependent on increased support from the United States.<sup>23</sup> As a result, between 1965 and 1970, Seoul sent various combat units to Vietnam in several phases. The Tiger Division, among South Korea's elite units and initially assigned to defend the country's capital, Seoul, was the first to be deployed in 1965.<sup>24</sup> In return for its military contributions, the South Korean government received \$927 million from the United States, which was strategically invested in industrial development, infrastructure, and modernization, aiding its shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy.<sup>25</sup> These funds also stabilized the economy, bolstered foreign reserves, and facilitated debt repayment, crucially contributing to South Korea's dramatic transformation into a major global economic force.

Numerous Korean soldiers, mainly from rural and impoverished areas, were encouraged by the South Korean government to fight in the Vietnam War.<sup>26</sup> Economic incentives were the primary motivation for both the nation and individual soldiers, including material and financial support guaranteed to the South Korean government by the United States.<sup>27</sup> Although, the South Korean government presented their involvement as part of a larger, more significant cause against communism.<sup>28</sup> Under naive assumptions about the service conditions, these soldiers envisaged not only financial benefits but also a more comfortable and less demanding military life, driven by the perceived adventure and exposure to new cultures, better resources at American bases, promotional narratives that highlighted personal development opportunities, and important contributions to global anti-communism efforts.<sup>29</sup> However, despite what seemed like a favorable deal with the Americans, Korean soldiers were compensated only a third of what American soldiers received.<sup>30</sup> This amount was a significant disparity given the high risks involved in a war that was not directly related

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Park, "The Colonized Colonizers," 219.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>30</sup> Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags,"* 47.

to the Koreans.<sup>31</sup> Blackburn did not hesitate to label Korean soldiers as “mercenaries.”<sup>32</sup> This categorization is accurate not only because of the Koreans fighting for monetary gains but also because it reflects the effectiveness of Korean soldiers in Vietnam. These monetary incentives also contributed to the brutality of Korean soldiers in Vietnam; in this mercenary system, the more North Vietnamese they killed, civilians included, the more they were financially rewarded.<sup>33</sup>

### **On-Ground Accounts: Korean Brutality and American Ignorance**

According to various sources compiled by The Diplomat, South China Morning Post, and other networks, it is reported that while in Vietnam, South Korean troops were implicated in approximately 80 massacres, resulting in 8,000 to 9,000 civilian deaths.<sup>34</sup> This raises questions: What led Korean soldiers to commit these brutalities? And how did South Korea’s relationship with the United States influence the troops and their military tactics on the ground? In *The Shadows of Arms*, the most prominent novel written by a Korean Vietnam War veteran that realistically depicts the firsthand accounts of South Korean soldiers in Vietnam, author Hwang Sok-yong likens Korean soldiers to mercenary hunting dogs that constantly follow their master’s commands without ever questioning their intent:

A hunting dog runs and sports only at the command of his master. But whether he runs straight or in a parabolic arc, runs past and comes back to retrieve or pauses a few steps before, these choices are entirely at his discretion. Whether the target prey happens to be a duck, a pheasant, a sniper and old shoe, or even a deflated ball, he’s got to lock his teeth on it and bring it back to his master. It is not for the hunting dog to figure out whether the prey is delicious, useful, or inedible.<sup>35</sup>

The metaphor drawing a parallel of South Korean soldiers in the Vietnam War to mercenary hunting dogs poignantly captures their lack of agency and

---

<sup>31</sup> Park, “The Colonized Colonizers,” 234.

<sup>32</sup> Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson’s “More Flags,”* 47.

<sup>33</sup> Park, “The Colonized Colonizers,” 234.

<sup>34</sup> Do, “The Forgotten History.”

<sup>35</sup> Sok-yong Hwang, *The Shadow of Arms* (Ithaca, N.Y: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1994), 47.

dehumanization, underscoring their role as mere tools in the United States and South Korea's larger geopolitical game. It emphasizes how the soldiers obediently executed orders from their American commanders without contemplating their broader implications or moral consequences. Hwang Sok-yong's account also sheds light on the impact of the U.S.-South Korea relations with Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War. The soldiers, akin to hunting dogs focused solely on capturing their target, faced no repercussions for the methods used or the trauma inflicted on innocent Vietnamese civilians.

Adhering to the orders of their former American commanders, who were staunch advocates of anti-communist rhetoric, the Korean soldiers in Vietnam were emboldened in their harsh treatment of Viet Cong captives, gaining a reputation for battlefield ferocity.<sup>36</sup> This ideological stance, deeply rooted in anti-communist and anti-imperialist sentiments, was also a direct continuation of the political climate fostered in the aftermath of the Korean War. In 1951, encouraged by the United States and their geopolitical interest—in communism containment—in East Asia, the then South Korean President Syngman Rhee had envisioned Korea as the pivotal nation in the Asian People's Anti-Communist League (APACL).<sup>37</sup> This initiative aimed to position South Korea as a stronghold against the communist and imperialist influences of China, the Soviet Union, and Japan. Such sentiments, prevalent during Rhee's presidency, persisted under Park Chung-hee's leadership, where the government similarly used anti-communist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, along with monetary incentives, to motivate South Korean soldiers' involvement in the Vietnam War. Given such context, it becomes clear that Korean soldiers in Vietnam were united by a strong enforcement of anti-communist ideology, both from their American commanders and within their own ranks. This, combined with vivid memories of the Korean War's brutality and the mercenary nature of their military engagement, drove them to a zealous commitment in their operations. The intensity of their actions was further amplified by the existing U.S.-South Korea relations, reinforcing South Korea's stance against communism. These factors— ideological indoctrination, historical trauma, economic motivation, and international alliances— created a complex dynamic that underpinned the Korean soldiers' fierce and unyielding approach in Vietnam.

---

<sup>36</sup> Park, "The Colonized Colonizers," 234.

<sup>37</sup> Dongil Shin, "To Realize Our Decolonization: South Korea's Deployment Of Troops To Vietnam." *International Journal of Korean History* 27, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2022.27.1.213218>

In addition, Korean soldiers' military mindset was further bolstered by the lack of human rights accountability measures enforced by the American commanders. According to historian Nick Turse, Korean soldiers were under the general American military culture where "producing a high body count was crucial for promotion in the officer corps."<sup>38</sup> Many high-level officers established "production quotas" for their units, and systems of "debit" and "credit" to calculate exactly how efficiently subordinate units and middle-management personnel performed.<sup>39</sup> Different formulas were used, but the commitment to war as a rational production process was common to all.<sup>40</sup> For these soldiers, the overriding priority was not the complexities of combat ethics or the human cost of war, but rather meeting established standards and accumulating "production quota" and credits" in a system that measured success in the grim tally of human bodies and heads. This mindset reduced the grim reality of war to a transactional game, where the value of human life was overshadowed by the pursuit of numerical targets and the achievement of a perverse form of efficiency. This focus on quantitative achievements, coupled with the American commanders' disregard for accountability, created an environment that not only tolerated but implicitly encouraged violence by Korean military personnel on the ground. Consequently, the Vietnam War's on-ground permissive atmosphere contributed to the brutality exhibited by Korean troops in their operations.

In the complex context of the Vietnam War, Korean soldiers, driven by prevailing previous anti-communist animosities and the absence of accountability measures, were adept at executing orders with brutal efficiency, akin to a relentless hunting dog described by Hwang. The intricate U.S.-South Korea relationship, bound by anti-communist rhetoric and South Korea's trust in America as a previous ally and "savior" in the Korean War, facilitated a particularly harsh military conduct. This severity was further fueled by the American perception of South Korean troops as mercenaries, an attitude that seemingly endorsed, if not encouraged, their brutal actions. The legacy of this era persists, evident not only in South Korea's refusal to acknowledge its role in the massacre of innocent Vietnamese civilians during the tenure of its troops in Vietnam but also in its shirking of responsibility towards its own veterans. This approach, coupled with the government's denial of war crimes and its

---

<sup>38</sup> Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co, 2013), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



neglect in providing sufficient support to affected veterans, prompts a critical examination of whether and how South Korea, once a hermit kingdom with an extensive colonial history, evolved into a perpetrator of colonization during its military involvement in Vietnam.

### **From the Colonized to the “Colonizer”: South Korea’s Paradox Role**

Regarding South Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War, some Korean scholars have argued that the deployment and subsequent actions of Korean soldiers were crucial steps in the nation’s self-decolonization and quest for independence.<sup>41</sup> They suggest that this involvement was a strategic move to demonstrate South Korea’s military capabilities and bolster its standing as an emerging independent nation on the international stage.<sup>42</sup> While this perspective is coherent and valid within the context, it does not diminish the country’s geopolitical and economic dependence on the United States. Moreover, there is a distinct irony in this situation: South Korea’s pursuit of decolonization and independence paradoxically involved participating in similarly violent acts in Vietnam, akin to those South Korea itself had endured during its colonial era.

According to historian Jinim Park, many of the Korean soldiers had a “troubled and ambivalent” views on the Vietnamese people they were tasked as enemies.<sup>43</sup> Many of them felt a stronger sympathy for the Vietnamese than for American soldiers, yet simultaneously felt superior to the Vietnamese, viewing themselves as allies of the Americans.<sup>44</sup> Within the ranks of Korean soldiers stationed in Vietnam, there was a growing sense of disillusionment and questioning about their role in the war.<sup>45</sup> This introspection was poignantly captured in Park’s narrative, where a character reflects that the Vietnam War was not “mine” but “theirs,” highlighting the alienation felt by many Korean soldiers.<sup>46</sup> Despite this growing realization and their own nation’s history of being a colonized country, the empathy that might have been expected did not materialize in a significant way. The inherent contradiction in this situation is striking: Korean soldiers, despite their postcolonial background and

---

<sup>41</sup> Shin, “To Realize our Decolonization.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Park, “The Colonized Colonizers,” 223.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

collective memory of colonization, were unable to refuse orders from their American commanders. This disconnect, highlighted by Park, led to the ironic outcome where the individual soldiers' doubts and questions did not result in a less brutal approach by the larger South Korean military forces. Their inability to disobey reflects deep-seated military discipline and the strategic alliances of the Cold War era, where broader geopolitical considerations often overshadowed individual and national histories of suffering. Consequently, their actions remained as atrocious as recorded, emphasizing the complex interplay between identity, historical memory, and the harsh realities of war. Despite being former victims of imperialism, South Korean soldiers were now instruments in another foreign conflict, ironically driven by the hope for democratic independence.

### **Military Withdrawals and the Buried Stories of South Korean Soldiers in Vietnam**

In the early 1970s, as part of the broader effort to reduce foreign military presence in Vietnam, South Korea began withdrawing its forces in line with newly elected President Richard M. Nixon's Guam Doctrine, which advocated for Asian nations to self-defend against communist offenses and led to the reduction of U.S. troops in Asia.<sup>47</sup> During this period, President Park Chung-hee leveraged the Korean troop withdrawals and successfully negotiated substantial military and economic aid of \$1.5 billion from the U.S. to support South Korea's military modernization and economic development, transforming its military into a 600,000-strong force and bolstering its economy to the "Miracle on the Han River" for which South Korea's transformation was dubbed.<sup>48</sup> Despite domestic anti-war sentiment and high casualties, South Korea's involvement in the war, initially driven by its geopolitical and economic dependency on the U.S., ultimately led to significant gains in its international standing and national development.

Today, although there are increasing calls for recognition from Vietnamese victims, the issue of Korean soldiers' involvement in the Vietnam War remains largely overlooked in both Korea and the United States. Historian Jinim Park notes that in South Korea, the Vietnam War is often overshadowed by more immediate national concerns and the legacy of the Korean War, leading to a perception of the conflict as

---

<sup>47</sup> Kim and Vogel, *The Park Chung Hee Era*, 420-42.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

peripheral.<sup>49</sup> The South Korean government has neither acknowledged the atrocities committed by its troops in Vietnam nor provided reparations to Vietnamese victims. Additionally, it has neglected its responsibility towards Korean veterans affected by the war. In 1997, the Seoul District Court dismissed claims for compensation related to Agent Orange exposure, with the government deflecting blame to American control and denying involvement in decision-making.<sup>50</sup> This avoidance of accountability is further complicated by South Korea's significant economic ties with Vietnam, which have led the Vietnamese government to prioritize economic relations over addressing historical grievances.

Against this backdrop, emerging from the shadows of colonialism and the ruins of war, South Korea found in the United States not just a liberator but a crucial protector in its quest for security and development. This alliance, however, was not without its anxieties. The country's reliance on U.S. military support during and after the Korean War ingrained a sense of dependence, which was further complicated by the U.S.'s own strategic interests in the region. Categorized as the United States' "mercenary hunting dog," South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War was a complex relationship, reflecting both its geopolitical dependence and aspirations for sovereign recognition.<sup>51</sup> The irony of South Korea's transition from a colonized nation to a participant in the violent conquest of another country underscores the intricate interplay of power, identity, and history in international relations. Ultimately, South Korea's journey through the tumultuous landscapes of the 20th century reveals the challenging path of a nation navigating the pressures of global geopolitics while striving to establish its own place in the world.

---

<sup>49</sup> Park, "The Colonized Colonizers," 219.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 217-218.

<sup>51</sup> Hwang, *The Shadow of Arms*, 47.