

A Perspective on Korea's Participation in the Vietnam War

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If the Korean War is the “forgotten war” in the United States, the Vietnam War (1964-1973) is Korea’s own forgotten war.¹ Despite the fact that ROK forces made up the second largest foreign military contingent after the United States, lost more than 5,000 lives, and played a significant role in averting communist dominance of the central coastal area, their experience hardly seems to have left a mark in contemporary Korean society.² The lack of remembrance may be attributable to a simple fact—South Vietnam, the recipient of Korea’s sacrifice, disappeared from the map following the communist victory in 1975. Other possible factors include previous state censorship of historical research about the war and general disinterest among today’s mass media and popular culture.³

While few Korean scholars have written on this topic, the popularized work tends to perpetuate the biases of those critical of Park Chung Hee, the Korean leader responsible for sending troops to Vietnam. For example, the soldiers who fought there are perceived as victims of US imperial aggression in Southeast Asia or Park’s “mercenaries” sent to a warzone for profit. To counter such views, several ROK Vietnam War veterans penned memoirs of their experience of the war. But there has been little interest in their work outside veterans associations. The veterans groups

themselves are generally ignored by the public, save for their occasional protests against the government's neglect of their welfare, especially those affected by Agent Orange, a controversial chemical defoliant used by the US military during the war.

Next year, Koreans will mark the 50th anniversary of their country's military engagement in Vietnam, and the timing is appropriate for some perspective on the war as commemoration begins. In fact, the legacies of Vietnam are plainly visible today. Korea's contribution to the war enabled the Korean government to secure necessary capital to jump-start Park's ambitious economic development plan in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is hardly a coincidence that Korea's GDP grew at a rapid pace during the years Korean troops were deployed in Vietnam. Militarily, the government took full advantage of concessions from the Americans and used them to initiate modernization of Korean armed forces, which now ranks eighth in global military firepower.⁴ The Vietnam experience also taught an important lesson in the management of Korea's relationship with the United States that—despite the alliance that binds them—each is motivated by self-interest.

Actually, Polls Say...

A recent survey of Korean public opinion suggests the majority are keenly aware of their country's involvement in Vietnam and maintain nuanced views of the war. According to a 2012 survey by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies,⁵ most Koreans (80%) know of their country's military's role in Vietnam and more than half (57%) believe the country's decision to participate in the war was the right choice. Contrary to the Park government's stated rationale for fighting in Vietnam—to deter communist aggression in Southeast Asia—a slight majority (54%) think that ROK forces were deployed to gain economic benefits for Korea and one in four (27%) say the troops were sent as recompense to the United States for saving the Republic of Korea during the Korean War. Among those who equate troop deployment with economic reasons, a majority (58%) think Korea achieved this goal while others disagree or remain ambivalent. When asked whether Korea's military involvement strengthened ROK-US relations overall, more than two thirds (68%) say the experience had either a "strong" (20%) or "somewhat" (48%) positive impact on the alliance.

The Asan survey, which also gauged the public's views of ROK soldiers who fought in Vietnam, suggests Koreans have no strong feelings toward the veterans. About a third (38%) think the men were simply obeying orders while a quarter of the respondents believe these soldiers acted as mercenaries (27%). Reflecting the society's unsettled stance toward the Vietnam War, about a third (30%) do not have particular views on the veterans. Regardless of their feelings toward their country's participation in the war, an overwhelming majority (91%) believe that the Korean government should provide special assistance to those veterans suffering from the effects of Agent Orange or other war-related injuries.

Some Context...

Korea's involvement in Vietnam was about more than just boots on the ground. Viewed within the context of domestic instability, impoverishment, and Cold War confrontation of the early 1960s, the ROK government's decision to dispatch hundreds of thousands of men to a foreign war was an improbable undertaking. Korea was mired in political turmoil after the successive mass uprising and military coup that toppled the previous government; it ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world with a GNI per capita of US\$93 in 1961;⁶ and the nation's armed forces of 600,000 men were wholly dependent on American military aid to stay afloat.

Irrespective of these conditions at home, Korean troops proved effective in their area of operations, providing protection to the South Vietnamese in the central coastal area and preventing North Vietnamese and Viet Cong domination there. American war planners leaned heavily on ROK forces, given their ability to carry out missions with considerable success. In the minds of US military peers, the Koreans outperformed other allied forces in Vietnam in lethality, organization, and professionalism.⁷ However, it was not all sweetness and light. Under orders to avoid high casualties, ROK forces were perceived by the Americans as difficult and inflexible, preferring instead to remain in the safety of their bases as war dragged on. Worse yet, decades after Korea's departure from Vietnam, stories emerged implicating ROK troops of massacring thousands of innocent civilians.⁸

Korea’s “El Dorado”

ROK participation in Vietnam was made possible because the United States was willing to underwrite the entire Korean military and civilian operations in the country. And for Korea’s contribution to the war, the ROK government was well compensated. Korea is believed to have earned US\$5 billion during eight years of deployment from various sources, including increased American military assistance to modernize ROK armed forces, special allowances paid to ROK soldiers in Vietnam, multi-million-dollar civilian contracts, and expanded trade with Vietnam.⁹ After the first two years of deployment, revenues from the war made up 40 percent of Korea’s foreign exchange earnings,¹⁰ and from 1965 to 1972, the country earned an estimated US\$1 billion in hard currency.¹¹

While a precise correlation between the Vietnam War and Korea’s economic growth has not yet been established, it is reasonable to conclude that Korean participation in Vietnam was a contributing factor in the country’s rapid economic development. Some scholars estimate that financial gains from the war accounted for 7-8 percent of Korea’s GDP in 1966-1969.¹² As a matter of fact, Korea’s GDP increased four-fold between 1963—the year before Vietnam deployment—and 1973—the year of withdrawal.¹³ Korea’s impressive growth coincided with Park’s export-oriented industrialization program (1967-1972) in which the government sought to expand exports by supporting particular firms with subsidized loans, price controls, and tax reductions while protecting the domestic market with import quotas.¹⁴

Complex Relationship with the United States

Contrary to the aforementioned majority view that Vietnam largely strengthened ROK-US relations, a review of archival records detailing tense diplomacy surrounding Korea’s presence in Vietnam suggests otherwise. Motivated by his drive to build legitimacy, lift Korea out of poverty, and prevent US disengagement from Korea, President Park actively sought to send men to Vietnam to fight alongside the United States. In the first half of the deployment period, the Park government enjoyed a close relationship with an eager Johnson administration that—in the minds of Korea’s leaders—had treated Korea as an “equal” partner in the alliance.

After all, it was the Johnson White House that had agreed to provide an unprecedented level of assistance to Korea in return for ROK troops to Vietnam.

But the bilateral relationship began to sour as a result of unintended consequences of Korean participation in Vietnam, as well as a unilateral US decision to reduce its commitments in Asia. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), inspired by the North Vietnamese tactics against South Vietnam, stepped up armed hostility against the Republic of Korea in hopes of establishing a base for eventual warfare below the 38th parallel.¹⁵ The DPRK's provocation culminated in a bold raid on the Korean presidential palace and the seizure of the *USS Pueblo* in January 1968, causing a major rift in the alliance over the handling of the twin crises and the Americans' fear of unilateral Korean retaliatory attacks that would trigger an all-out war on the Korean Peninsula.

The subsequent Nixon administration's move to cut significant portions of US forces from Korea in 1971 jolted the Korean government, which had been promised a voice on such matters by the previous US administration. At the same time, the Nixon White House prevented the Koreans from withdrawing their forces from Vietnam lest it created a security vacuum in the central coastal area while the Americans began pulling back from the country. The Americans achieved this with threats of additional US troop withdrawal from Korea should the Koreans bring back troops from Vietnam. Coupled with Korea's bitter experience in the second half of its Vietnam deployment, during which it felt underappreciated by the Americans, the US-China détente and the eventual fall of Saigon sowed deep suspicions about American commitment to Korea's security and compelled the country's leaders to seek increased independence from the United States, including an aborted attempt to build Korea's own nuclear weapons program.

Influence on a “Global Korea”?

The Vietnam experience left one additional legacy for Korea. ROK participation in the war along with other allied countries—South Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines—propelled Korea onto the world stage as a regional player for the first time since its founding. Korea's diplomacy quickly ex-

panded, going beyond the typical military and economic aid to include international security and trade. Shortly after Korea's deployment, the Park government became the architect and first host nation to hold the ministerial meeting for Asian and Pacific Cooperation in June 1966. The successful meeting surprised the skeptical Johnson administration, which doubted Korea's ability to pull off a major international conference. At subsequent conferences, Korea remained the most vocal anti-communist nation opposed to a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam.

Under vastly different circumstances, Korea today displays similar forward-leaning qualities when it comes to international security. Buoyed by its OECD donor status, the country has emerged as a major contributor to various global peacekeeping and stabilization operations despite cost and sacrifice not directly tied to tangible returns on investment.¹⁶ Korea's budget for international security operations has more than tripled between 2007 and 2010, and the number of ROK soldiers deployed for overseas missions has doubled during the same period. These overseas operations include UN peacekeeping duties in Haiti and Lebanon, contributions to international antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, and the dispatch of combat troops to protect the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan. Public opinion appears to support the Korean government's approach to international security. When asked in the Asan survey about Korea's participation in any US-led operations overseas in the future, a near majority (47%) said they would support the move.

Conclusion

South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War was a "war of choice." The Korean government initially sought a role in Vietnam to halt US economic and military disengagement from Korea, calculating that Korea's own military contribution would demonstrate its commitment to the United States and to preventing communist expansion in Asia. Once the conflict in Vietnam escalated to a full-scale war after 1964, Korea's prolonged engagement in Vietnam was driven largely by Park's desire to extract benefits for his country.

Had it not been for Park's decision to involve his country in the Vietnam War, it is

questionable whether his fledgling government would have been able to achieve the level of economic success that it did in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In fact, the Asan survey indicates that more than 40 percent of those polled view Park's decision to fight in Vietnam as one of his greatest achievements. However, Park's decision to fight in Vietnam had deeply negative political consequences. The experience severely tested South Korea's alliance with the United States, intensified confrontation with North Korea, and nearly touched off a large-scale war on the Korean Peninsula.

Aside from the economic and political legacies of South Korea's experience in Vietnam, the tradition of Korea's overseas military deployment appears alive and well today—albeit with different aspirations and circumstances. In the context of Korea's growing role on the international stage, the time has come for a proper appreciation and reflection on the country's participation in the Vietnam War.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

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1. Remco Breuker, "Korea's Forgotten War: Appropriating and Subverting the Vietnam War in Korean Popular Imaginings," *Korean Histories* 1.1 (2009): 37-38.
 2. Vietnam War Statistics, Institute for Military History Compilation, www.imhc.mil.kr/imhcroot/data/vietnam_list.jsp.
 3. Breuker notes that few South Korean scholars have tried to chart the influence ROK troop deployments to Vietnam have had on South Korea's economy and culture, and these studies have yet to tap mainstream historical narratives at home or abroad.
 4. See: Global Firepower, <http://www.globalfirepower.com>.
 5. The Asan survey was conducted from October 13-October 15, 2012, and November 12-14, 2012, among a representative sample of 1,046 adults and has a margin of sampling error of +/- 3.1 points. The survey was administered by Research and Research, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Seoul, Korea.
 6. Gross National Income (GNI) is the sum value added by all resident producers plus any product taxes not included in the valuation of output plus net receipts of primary income from abroad. See: http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/eco_gni_cur_us_percap-gni-current-us-per-capita&date=1960.
 7. Lieutenant General Stanley Robert Larsen and Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1985): 140-154.
 8. *Reuters* cited in: Vietnam, News Analysis, "South Korean Troops in the Vietnam War," January 15, 2000, <http://www.vietquoc.com/jan15-00.htm>. Note: In the face of growing controversy, then Korean President Kim Dae Jung promptly issued an apology for his country's actions during the war.
 9. Choi Yongho, "한 권으로 읽는 베트남전쟁과 한국군" [Reading in one volume the Vietnam War and South Korean troops], (Seoul: ROK Ministry of Defense, Institute for Military History Compilation, 2006): 426. Note: Adjusted for inflation since 1973, US\$5 billion will now be worth US\$25.8 billion.
 10. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2002): 35.
 11. Choi Yongho.
 12. Park Won-soon, "Korea-Japan Treaty, Breakthrough for Nation Building," *The Korea Times*, March 19, 2010, <http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2012/12/291-62653.html>.
 13. Korea's GDP was US\$2.7 billion in 1963 and US\$10.73 billion in 1973. See: www.tradeineconomics.com. Note: We need to recognize the fact that such impressive growth was also made possible by the US\$800 million assistance package Korea received from Japan following the Seoul-Tokyo normalization in June 1965.
 14. During this period, no other Korean firm benefitted more from Vietnam than the Korean conglomerate Hanjin Group, the owner of Korea's flagship carrier Korean Air. Hanjin, then a small-time local ground carrier, secured lucrative civilian contracts from the US military in Vietnam with the financial backing of the Korean government.
 15. Memorandum of Conversation, "Mr. Bundy's Meeting with Mr. Colby," June 22, 1967, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, <http://history.sate.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d119>.
 16. Scott Snyder, "South Korea's Growing Role and Contributions to International Stability," PacNet #66, October 24, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/south-korea/global-korea/p29048>.



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