

The 1960s in South Korea

Modernisation, Nationalism and the Pursuit of Democratisation

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Abstract

In the 1960s, the South Korean authoritarian anti-communist system, which had been established immediately after the liberation of Korea in 1945, was transformed into an anti-communist developmental dictatorship. The student movement for democracy erupted in the spring of 1960 (April 19 Revolution) and brought down the authoritarian Rhee Syngman regime. But Park Chung Hee, a military general and former officer of the Japanese Imperial Army, seized power in a military coup on 16 May 1961. He was later elected to the presidency on an agenda of modernisation in a “nationalist democracy”. In 1965, despite strong student protests, he concluded a Treaty on Basic Relations with the country’s former colonial ruler, Japan, and took Korea to war in Vietnam, in the process setting the stage for a constitutional amendment that foreshadowed the transformation of the “developmental state” into the following decade’s “developmental dictatorship”. The focus of this paper is on the ideological structure of the transitional era in which the revolution for democracy led to the establishment of an anti-communist developmental dictatorship as a result of the combined effect of various conditions of South Korean politics and the international Cold War in the 1960s. Modernisation, anti-communism, nationalism and democracy were its essential ideological elements, and the regime changes of that decade depended on changes in the priorities and interrelations among them.

Keywords: South Korea, ROK, 1960s, regime change, Park Chung Hee, modernisation, democratisation, anti-communist developmental dictatorship

A coalition of anti-communism and modernisation

In the 1950s, Rhee Syngman, the first president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), replaced the democratic presidential system with an authoritarian system by amending the constitution to secure his power. Corruption, political terror and oppression of political opponents characterised his politics.¹ However, during his rule, South Korea² lacked the autonomy needed to promote economic growth. In 1960, the unemployment rate had reached 34.2%, but even those in paid em-

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ployment lived in impoverished conditions.³ In 1960, after his third re-election on 15 March, allegations of electoral fraud led to violent mass protests, which the Rhee regime was no longer able to withstand.

Large numbers of workers and urban poor participated in the protests against the elections of 15 March 1960 alongside schoolchildren and university students (Kim 2018: 60, Kim 2017: 51). They were not merely protesting against political corruption, but also demanding an improvement in economic equality. Once Rhee Syngman had resigned on 26 April, the workers expressed their demands more forcefully. As a result, the number of trade unions increased sharply after the April 19 Revolution. Some 344 new unions were established in 1960 alone (Lee 2013: 152). The number of labour disputes also increased sharply. From April to June 1960, there were 485 street protests (KDF 2008: 247, Göthel 1988: 77). Social democrats raised their voices again, insisting that democracy should be a real, not just formal, guarantee of substantive freedom and equality (Lee 1960: 99). Others advanced the claim that the Korean Peninsula should be turned into a neutral nation to create a unified nation-state. Nationalism, which had been suppressed by the extreme anti-communism of the Rhee Syngman government, re-emerged in the social discourse (Hong 2002: 1241). This was a pan-Korean nationalism reaching across the 38th parallel. However, South Korean voters did not support these progressive groups in the parliamentary elections of July 1960.⁴

The contemporary media overlooked the role of the urban poor and workers in the April 19 Revolution. Only college students were praised as its agents. What is more, the April 19 Revolution was reduced to having been directed at achieving a mere regime change. Meanwhile, Korean intellectuals were enthusiastic about the April Revolution, welcoming it as proof of the fact that democracy was, after all, possible in Korea, and celebrated the fact that such democracy had been brought about by popular revolt. In particular, intellectuals who gathered around the magazine *Sasanggye* (literally: “*The World of Thought*”), the leading intellectual publication of the time, were thrilled by the success of the April Revolution (Kim 2007: 369). As one contemporary contribution in *Sasanggye* put it: “We have now acquired the right to discuss ‘liberty’ and we have created an example of the successful exercise of civil rights” (Ma 2016: 182).

But under the newly elected democratic government, the economic situation did not improve and Koreans continued taking to the streets. The majority of intellectuals, who believed in liberal democracy as the ideal form of democracy,

1 See Armstrong, 2007, Cumings 1997, Kim 1996.

2 In the following, “Korean” refers to “South Korean” and “Korea” to “South Korea”, with the exception of statements referring to the time prior to Korean division. In some cases, where the distinction is relevant, “South” or “North” will be added to “Korea” and “Korean”, respectively.

3 Economic Planning Board 1961 and 1965.

4 In the legislative elections of 29 July 1960, the social democratic progressive forces won only five seats out of 233 in the Lower House and two seats out of 58 in the Upper House.

denounced these numerous demonstrations as mere chaos and unrest that posed a dangerous threat to public order and was attributable to the general population's low level of intelligence (Ma 2016: 184). They warned that if such "chaos" were to continue, it would lead to the creation of "a new form of dictatorship" and the loss of "the shining light of the April Revolution's struggle for civil rights" (ibid.: 185). What they feared most was that anti-national elements would allow communist infiltration. These critics were hardened anti-communists, to the point where they used the same logic against the demonstrators that they had used in their attacks against the Rhee Syngman government.

When Prime Minister Chang Myon could not find a swift response to the situation at hand, the government, too, became the target of criticism from the intellectuals. The editor-in-chief of *Sasanggye*, Chang Chun-ha, expressed the following warning in April 1961: "We hereby also declare that should the present National Assembly and government display any more indecisiveness, incompetence, and lack of planning, and should they continue to show themselves oblivious of their political responsibilities, this paper will have no choice but to engage in a relentless struggle to lead the way towards a fresh and energetic life of self-determination for the Korean people" (Ma 2016: 188).

This was the background against which a minority of Korean military officers led by General Park Chung Hee staged a coup d'état on 16 May 1961. Immediately after the coup, the new military junta proclaimed in its revolutionary pledge that it would fortify the anti-communist system and strengthen ties with the United States, fully commit to reconstructing a self-reliant national economy, focus on cultivating military strength to confront communism and then return to its original duties once these tasks were accomplished (Park 1962). The aim behind the revolutionary pledge was to establish economic self-reliance under the banner of fighting against, and achieving a victory over, communism. With this pledge, the military wanted to cut off the progressive and innovative discussions on unification that had begun to emerge after the April 19 Revolution and make clear its determination to actively participate in the United States' rigorous anti-communist containment policies in the global Cold War order. More than anything, the pledge was the product of Park Chung Hee's strategic calculation aimed at quickly gaining recognition for his military coup from the United States. On 3 July 1961, in his inaugural address as chairman of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction, Park Chung Hee stated that a coup had been unavoidable in order to eradicate corruption, end poverty and fight communism, and emphasised that the coup's motive had been to safeguard the basic democratic structure of the present Constitution. It was his intention to make it appear as if the coup d'état of 16 May had inherited the spirit of the April 19 Revolution and constituted the crystallisation of the general public's demands.

The majority of Korean intellectuals at the time did, in fact, accept the coup as unavoidable. In the preface to its 1961 June edition, *Sasanggye*, which had previously been critical of dictatorial rule, took the stance that while the coup of 16 May was “unfortunate” and could be “nothing but regrettable”, it was “unavoidable when seen in the light of the pressing needs of our nation’s reality” (Ma 2016: 186). These intellectuals believed the military would use its considerable power and might to establish a state based on the rule of law and eradicate corruption, restore and maintain public order, end the practice of usury in fishing and farming villages, and take action in the field of regional development. The university students, who, together with the impoverished urban workers, had been the driving force of the April 19 Revolution, were equally won over by the military’s modernist and reformist logic and remained silent in the face of the coup d’état (Kim 2018: 56). It was thus through the medium of anti-communism coupled with modernisation that a connecting link had formed between the military and the intellectuals.

A political arena thus characterised by solidarity – mediated by the notions of anti-communism and modernisation – between the military and the intellectual elite left no room for any political agency on the part of the workers, who demanded economic democratisation. The political space to advocate progressive ideas such as socialism equally disappeared with the military’s plans for economic reconstruction founded on the notion of a “victory over communism”.

To Park Chung Hee, “whether or not the coup succeeded in establishing a self-reliant economy and achieving an industrial revolution” was “all that mattered” and the sole criterion of its success or failure (Park 1997: 262). He emphasised that first and foremost the Korean people had to be remodelled into new humans so that they could provide the driving force for modernising industrial, economic, cultural and societal structures, eradicating old evils and corruption, and realising the kind of social reforms that were necessary to “remedy the decadence of public morals” (Kim 2014: 166). He appealed to Koreans to resolve to follow the example of West German economic development in the 1950s, the “Miracle on the Rhine”, “take on the hardship and toil away [...] endure and be patient for the next ten years”, and adopt a code of conduct according to which “the economy reigns supreme [...], construction comes first [...] and] labour must be the top priority” (Park 1997: 270–271).

The military leaders of the coup d’état of 1961 were not the first to argue that Koreans had to remodel their “national character” or “national mentality”. In the 1920s, when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule, there were those who argued that in order to regain their national independence, Koreans would have to remodel their national character first (Kim 2007: 373). In the more recent past, contributions by Korean intellectuals to publications such as *Sasanggye* and *Ch’ongmaek* (“*The Green Stem*”) similarly argued that the modernisation of Korea required a remodelling of the Koreans’ national character (Kim 2014:

156–157). This hints at another commonality between the military leaders of the 1961 coup d'état and the Korean intellectuals of the time: they shared the belief that a reform of the national character of the Korean people was indispensable to the modernisation of the Korean state.

However, it cannot be said that the critical Korean intellectuals grouped around *Sasanggye* in the first half of the 1960s placed unreserved trust in Park Chung Hee and his military clique (Kim 2007: 370). In fact, there were (subtle) differences between what the military and the intellectuals meant when speaking of modernisation, differences which would later become apparent and problematic. *Sasanggye*'s notions of modernisation were closer to the Western model by the early 1960s. Modernisation as advocated by Park Chung Hee bore more similarity to modernisation as propagated in Meiji Japan (1868–1912) than to modernisation according to the Western model (Lee 2011: 434). To the general, the primary tasks of modernisation were, first, to “free the people from the vestiges of semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism”, second, “free the people from poverty and achieve economic self-reliance”, and, third, rebuild a “healthy democracy” (Park 2006: 388–390, 453). By “healthy democracy”, he was referring not to a democracy founded on Western liberal notions of individuality, but to the kind of “guided democracy” required for the modernisation of a developing country (*ibid.*) – in other words, a democracy guided and managed by state power (Kim 2014: 156).

This was also the prevailing public mood when Park Chung Hee took off his uniform and – thus “transformed” into a civilian – ran for office in the 1963 presidential elections. By standing in the presidential elections, Park Chung Hee fell short of the promise contained in the revolutionary pledge to hand over power to a civilian government once the tasks of the “revolution” were completed. Having succeeded in the presidential elections, Park Chung Hee declared at his presidential inauguration ceremony on 17 December 1963 that “all Koreans” would have to “join forces and work hard” in order to succeed in the “modernisation of the homeland”, and that they would have to foster a “sense of independent agency” (Park 1973: 4). He reduced the notion of modernisation to the issue of overcoming poverty in a strictly economic sense and declared the establishment of the economic self-reliance necessary for leaving behind the status of a developing country to be the central purpose of modernising the homeland. This marked a clear difference from the intellectuals' discourses on modernisation that postulated modernisation in all areas of life and society for Korea to emerge from its status as a developing country.⁵

In the initial stages of its rule, the military government, without first consulting with the United States, drew up an economic development plan for building an economy relying on domestic capital only and achieving balanced

5 For details on the modernisation discourse among Korean intellectuals starting in the 1950s, see Sin 2017: 58, and Kim 2007.

growth. It also introduced a number of emergency measures aimed at raising domestic capital at short notice, but these did not succeed (Kim 2004: 79–80). This failure in economic policy posed a grave threat to the legitimacy of the coup d'état. Park Chung Hee needed a plan for averting potential crises resulting from such failures of his military government's economic policies. Both the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Japan and the deployment of Korean troops to Vietnam unfolded against this background.

The end of the coalition for national (Korean) democracy

The United States had been pressing Korea to normalise its relations with Japan almost continuously from the 1950s onwards. The fiscal deficit of the United States had sharply increased in the mid-1950s, not least on account of its engagement in the Korean War, which required it to reduce both its defence and foreign aid budgets. To do so, the United States needed to reduce the number of US troops stationed abroad and the volume of its spending on foreign military aid, but Rhee Syngman had protested vehemently against corresponding plans for Korea. The United States, trying to appease him, started to deploy nuclear weapons on South Korean territory from 1958 onwards (Baek 2013: 149, 151). As Korea was one of the countries that received the most foreign aid from the United States, the latter wished for Korea to normalise its diplomatic relations with Japan, the hope being that Japan, instead, would come to provide economic aid to Korea and that the path could be cleared for a North-East Asian anti-communist system of collective security with Japan at its centre (Kim Won 2013: 125). However, as a vigorously anti-Japanese former independence activist, Rhee Syngman was fundamentally opposed to any such plans, fearing a threat to Korean independence from renewed Japanese expansionism. Following the coup of 1961, the government of US President John Kennedy, which recognised the new military government, repeated previous US demands for a normalisation of Korean diplomatic relations with Japan. Park Chung Hee, for his part, believed that a normalisation of diplomatic relations with Japan was necessary to raise the colossal sums of money needed for the fast-paced modernisation of the homeland through economic development, and he initiated secret negotiations with Japan. Having been an officer in the Japanese Imperial Army, Park was favourably inclined, rather than hostile, towards Japan (Baek 2013: 149).

When the news broke on 24 March 1964 that Park Chung Hee's comrade in the military coup and chairman of the newly formed Democratic Republican Party Kim Jong-pil had met with the Japanese Foreign Minister in Tokyo and agreed on a date for the signing of a treaty normalising diplomatic relations

with Japan, large numbers of university students took to the streets to express their opposition to a diplomacy of “self-abasement”, demanding that Kim Jong-pil be recalled to Korea immediately.

The Korean public equally considered the normalisation of relations with Japan – the country that had colonised the Korean peninsula and had never so much as apologised for its colonial rule – as an act directed against the Korean people. It was difficult to accept that Korea should conclude a treaty on the normalisation of diplomatic relations in exchange for a mere 300 million dollars in aid, even more so in a situation where the damage of the colonial past had not even been investigated, acknowledged or compensated for domestically. Moreover, it was felt that concluding such a treaty would mean conceding on the issue of Rhee Syngman’s maritime “Peace Line” and allowing Korea to become subsumed, as a mere sub-unit, into a system of international division of labour centred around Japan (Kim 2016: 112).

On 20 May 1964, about 3,000 students gathered in Seoul and performed a “funeral service” for “nationalist democracy” as it had been propagated by Park’s regime.⁶ They were joined by numerous intellectuals and citizens of Seoul. On 3 June 1964, about 50,000 people gathered in protest in Seoul alone, demanding that the Park Chung Hee government step down. That day, demonstrations unfolded all across the country. As had been the case during the April 19 Revolution, many people were injured in clashes between protesting students and police forces. At 9 o’clock in the evening, as a group of protesters approached the Blue House – the executive office and official residence of the president of the ROK – the government declared martial law for all of Seoul. By around midnight, the protest had been completely suppressed by tanks ordered into Seoul in accordance with martial law. Martial law brought with it press censorship and the closure of universities. It also meant the prohibition of all forms of assembly and the imposition of a nightly curfew. The newspapers of the following day, 4 June 1964, contained nothing on the protests other than official government announcements. No protests could be held from that time onwards, which meant the end of the movement against Korean-Japanese talks on the normalisation of diplomatic relations, which came to be known as the June 3 Resistance Movement.

In *Sasanggye*, Ham Sök-hön, one of the most influential progressive intellectuals at that time, attacked Park Chung Hee for being another Yi Wanyong, the Prime Minister of the Korean Empire who in 1910 had signed the treaty turning the country into a Japanese colony (Kim 2016: 112). Chang Chun-ha, the Editor-in-Chief of *Sasanggye*, called on Park Chung Hee to “give up the idolatrous idea that a mere 300 million dollars in economic cooperation funds

6 Students representing Seoul National University, Dongkuk University, Sungkyunkwan University, Konkuk University, Kyunghee University and Hanyang University gathered at Seoul National University, where they carried a coffin on their shoulders with the words “nationalist democracy” written on it.

could halt a worsening of the economic crisis” and accused Park Chung Hee’s government of “hastily and precipitately trying to settle relations with Japan in order to evade acute economic difficulty” and thereby engaging in a diplomacy of self-abasement towards Japan (Ma 2016: 192). Such diplomacy was the result of three years of corruption, wrongdoing and incompetence on the part of the military government, coupled with the usurpation and distortion of the democratic process. *Sasanggye* came to define the nationalist democracy advocated by Park Chung Hee as a mere “pretence” intended to cover up an essentially “pro-Japanese” act in the tradition of the “serving-the-great” mentality (ibid.). Park Chung Hee, it submitted, was “an old hand at lying and changing his mind” who had gone back on his promise of returning to the military and could no longer be trusted. The coup d’état of 16 May 1961 “[bore] no relation to the April 19 Revolution [and had] ultimately betrayed the glory of the April 19 Revolution [...] no matter what the initial intentions of the coup’s protagonists might have been” (ibid.).

The movement against Korean-Japanese talks meant that nationalism had become the cause of grave socio-political tension and conflict, and that the ties linking nationalism, anti-communism and modernisation had been severed. The Park Chung Hee government continued to promote its modernist agenda. Meanwhile, many intellectuals, feeling that the autonomy and self-reliance of the Korean people were under threat, decided to join the discourse on Korean nationalism. A heated debate thereby began to unfold in Korea surrounding the question of nationalism and its relation to anti-communism, the ideology of growth and democracy (Kim 2016: 113).

The construction of a mobilisation regime: Involvement in Vietnam

In addition to its plans for a normalisation of diplomatic relations with Japan, the Park Chung Hee government actively pursued plans for the deployment of Korean troops to Vietnam. In 1961, when the United States had not even decided on the deployment of its own troops to Vietnam, Park Chung Hee informed US President Kennedy of his willingness to dispatch Korean troops to Vietnam should the United States approve of and support the operation.⁷ To Park Chung Hee, who had come to power through a military coup, gaining the trust and support of the United States was central to the stability of his rule. He therefore elevated anti-communism to the status of an overarching state ideology. This was because anti-communism was the main goal of US for-

7 Document 247, Memorandum of Conversation, Kennedy–Park Chung Hee Meeting, Washington, 14 November 1961, 3:30–4:50 p.m. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XXII, Northeast Asia.

eign policy during the Cold War era. It was his eagerness to ingratiate himself with the United States that made Park Chung Hee approach the superpower about the possibility of deploying Korean troops to Vietnam. However, the Kennedy government did not take up his offer in 1961 for fear that doing so might negatively affect the prospect of negotiations on the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan (Baek 2013: 149, Lee 2012: 409).

Park, for his part, hoped to block any US plans for reducing expenditures on aid to Korea once a Korean-Japanese agreement – at the time still unachieved – would be concluded. He also hoped to secure the continued presence of US troops in Korea, blocking US plans for scaling down the size of troops stationed there (Bae 2015: 376).

Following a change in United States policy towards Vietnam, US President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had assumed the presidency following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, initiated the “Many Flags” campaign for Vietnam on 23 April 1964. In June 1964, it was agreed with the United States that Korea would dispatch an ambulance unit of 130 men and a group of ten Taekwondo instructors, who were sent to Vietnam on 11 September 1964 (Baek 2013: 152, Bae 2015: 373).

In a presidential address on 26 January 1965, Park expressed the conviction that “the communist attack on the Vietnam of the Free World” constituted “a grave threat to Korean security” and that supporting Vietnam was “an indirect form of protecting Korean national security” (Park 1969: 1404). This amounted to declaring the front in Vietnam to be directly linked to the Military Demarcation Line on the Korean peninsula, thereby constituting something akin to a second front against North Korea. Such statements revived the fresh memories of the Korean War that had started a mere 15 years previously and thus proved highly effective discursive devices for building a new system of mobilisation. North Korea reacted with alarm to the South Korean deployment of troops to Vietnam, declaring that the South and the United States would have to answer for all potential consequences, and the sudden increase in the number of hostilities between North and South Korean soldiers along the demilitarised zone (DMZ) created the environment in which Park Chung Hee’s discursive device of the “second front in Vietnam” could operate effectively (Yun 2012: 298).

Until 1966, the United States did not consider the armed confrontations in the Korean demilitarised zone a particularly serious problem. They saw such confrontations not so much as North Korean threats towards South Korea, but as acts initiated by the North with the intention of putting an end to South Korea’s deployment of troops to Vietnam.⁸ Park Chung Hee himself stressed during his November 1966 talks in Seoul with US President Lyndon B. John-

8 Document 35, Special National Intelligence Estimate, Washington, 19 March 1965. Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea; Document 98, Intelligence Memorandum, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

son that, while the demilitarised zone faced “chronic problems and incidents”, and while these incidents were “an irritating factor”, they did not constitute “a serious danger” (*ibid.*). He added: “If fighting increases in Vietnam, there may be increased and more sustained pressure at the DMZ.”⁹

In fact, Park’s government wanted to move beyond immediate defensive measures in the demilitarised zone and engage in active acts of retaliation for violations of the armistice agreement.¹⁰ Eventually, the South even set up and trained its own independent infiltration units and moved them into the North. In the second half of 1967, South Korean infiltration units crossed the DMZ and entered North Korea on average twice a month. In a raid in November 1967, a South Korean infiltration unit even blew up the Korean People’s Army’s Divisional Headquarters.¹¹ The US and UN commands were principally opposed to such acts on the part of the South Korean military for fear they might endanger the continued presence of UN forces on the peninsula.¹²

In the first half of 1966, the United States had promised military and economic aid to the Republic of Korea Army in exchange for more Korean troops being deployed to Vietnam.¹³ However, the first priority of US aid lay with Vietnam, and until 1967 the United States had taken no active steps towards modernising the ROK forces’ equipment.¹⁴ On 21 January 1968, a North Korean guerrilla unit advanced into Seoul and attacked the Blue House, and following the North Korean capture of the US Navy intelligence ship USS Pueblo and her eighty-three crew members on 23 January that year the United States changed its policy. In the immediate aftermath of the Pueblo incident, Cyrus R. Vance, who had been dispatched to Seoul from the United States as a Special Envoy, reported as follows to President Johnson: “We often heard them comment on

9 Document 96, Memorandum of Conversation between President Johnson and President Park, Seoul, 1 November 1966, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-68, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

10 During his meeting of 16 September 1967 with General Bonesteel, Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command in South Korea, Park Chung Hee expressed his position as follows: “[C]ounter-measures are most important to stop North Korean attacks, whenever the North Koreans violate the armistice they must be made to pay by retaliation.” Document 129, Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, 19 September 1967, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

11 Document 181, Memorandum from Cyrus R. Vance to President Johnson, Washington, 20 February 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

12 “Since ROK forces are under UNC [UN Command] operational control, the Soviets could then make case in the UNGA that UN forces themselves are violating the armistice agreement which they pledged to uphold and urge withdrawal UN presence.” Document 102, Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State Seoul, 29 November 1966, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea; Document 129, Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, 19 September 1967, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

13 Special US assistance to South Korea was promised in a letter from US Ambassador to South Korea, Winthrop G. Brown, on 4 March 1966. Document 133, Memorandum of Conversation, 13 November 1967, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea; Document 76, Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea Washington, 27 January 1966, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

14 Document 138, Memorandum from the Director of Defense Research and Engineering (Foster Jr., John S.) to Secretary of Defense McNamara, Washington, 7 December 1967, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

their inability to contain North Korean infiltration teams. The South Koreans are fearful that a North Korean strike/reconnaissance team will destroy some major economic facility, e.g., a refinery or a dam”.¹⁵ In that same report, he suggests there is a need to “continue modernisation of the ROK armed forces [... and] to push ahead with the task of strengthening [the South Korean] anti-infiltration system by expediting the flow of equipment” (ibid.).

The United States subsequently initiated procurement and delivery of a “counter-infiltration package” to the ROK forces, with some priority items in that package to be delivered “on a priority equal to that of equipment going to Viet-Nam”.¹⁶ The counter-infiltration package included the costs for “[i]ncreas[ing] the effectiveness of the land barrier across the demilitarised zone in Korea and its seaward extension” (ibid.). Work on replacing the relatively loose barbed wire and wooden fences which had previously demarcated the southern boundary of the demilitarised zone with a barbed wire fence with a height of two-and-a-half to three metres began from the middle of 1967. At the time, the United States was planning to construct a barbed wire fence along the Vietnamese demilitarised zone. The United States government thought that “Korean anti-infiltration training and experience could be particularly valuable in this type of assignment”¹⁷ and in fact, Korean soldiers deployed to Vietnam were mobilised in the construction of the Vietnamese barbed wire fence.

This was not the only time the United States would use Korea as a test site for equipment to be employed in the Vietnam War. Defoliants, too, were first tested for utility and effectiveness in the Korean demilitarised zone. According to US documents, the United States had supplied the ROK Army with defoliants and instructed them to spray them in Korea even before 1966 but did not officially notify the Korean government of its plans to use defoliants to remove vegetation until September 1967 (Lee 2011). It seems they supplied the defoliant to ROK forces without informing them of the fact that defoliants can be seriously detrimental to human health.¹⁸ On 8 January 1968, the Korean Minister of National Defence, Kim Söngün, outlined to the Korean press the additional counter-infiltration measures of “constructing a fence across and defoliating

15 Document 181, Memorandum from Cyrus R. Vance to President Johnson, Washington, 20 February 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

16 Document 154, Memorandum from the US Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach, Nicholas de B.) to President Johnson, Washington, DC, 5 February 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

17 Document 107, Memorandum from the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Smith, Rear Admiral John V.) to the President’s Special Assistant (Rostow, Walt W.), Washington, DC, 19 January 1967, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

18 That defoliants were sprayed in the Korean demilitarised zone first became known when a US soldier who had served in Tongduch’ön in 1968 filed a lawsuit against the US government in 1999 and was awarded compensation for the after-effects of the exposure to defoliants (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 25 May 2011, p. 29). There are also many victims of exposure to defoliants in the South Korean military. They began to be awarded compensation for the damages they had suffered from as late as 2007.

the DMZ”.¹⁹ By the end of the 1960s, defoliants had been sprayed along the barbed wire of the Korean demilitarised zone, while landmines identical with those employed in Vietnam had been placed in the area of both the demilitarised zone’s barbed wire fence and the fortified bunkers. One Korean newspaper estimated that the South had thereby gained a “perfect line of defence”.²⁰

In this manner Korea had, in fact, become a second front in the Vietnam War. The Korean government mobilised large numbers of Koreans to send off soldiers being dispatched to Vietnam and to welcome those returning from Vietnam. Soldiers about to leave for Vietnam paraded through the centre of Seoul as part of carefully orchestrated official send-off ceremonies involving students, citizens and even celebrities.²¹ The “send a comfort letter to a soldier deployed to Vietnam” campaign is an excellent example of the government’s strenuous mobilisation efforts. Its goal was to amass eight million “comfort letters” in the three months from 20 July to 19 October 1967. However, by the end of the war, the number of letters sent back home by soldiers deployed to Vietnam amounted to five times the number of letters they had received, in spite of the fact that even elementary school students had been mobilised to write the “comfort letters”. Yun Ch’ung-ro considers this the result of a form of passive resistance against the Vietnam War by ordinary Koreans (Yun 2012: 304). However, interpreting not sending “comfort letters” to soldiers in the field as a form of resistance against the Vietnam War might be going a step too far.

Rather than with news from the battlefields, Koreans at the time associated Vietnam with the television sets, transistor radios, cameras and recorders contained in the soldiers’ “homecoming boxes” and with families whose attire would suddenly improve upon returning from a trip to the bank to collect the soldiers’ remittances. This was true to the point where one newspaper observed “an overwhelming climate” of finding meaning in the deployment to the Vietnam War “in personal interests related to the practicalities of life rather than in a national cause” (Yun 2012: 298). Ordinary Koreans saw Vietnam not as a smoke-filled battlefield but as a “blessed and promised land flowing with milk and honey”. It was even said that one could easily make a fortune with only one year’s service in Vietnam (*ibid.*).

According to official figures, Korean foreign currency exchange earnings related to the Vietnam War amounted to one billion thirty-six million dollars

19 Document 143, Editorial Note, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

20 Lee Yŏn’gyo 1968. To this day, the barbed wire fence along the southern boundary of the Korean demilitarised zone is preserved in the form it took in the late 1960s.

21 Parades and ceremonies included the First National Send-off Parade (August 1966, White Horse Unit), welcoming parades for the triumphant return of soldiers from Vietnam (1971–1972, Blue Dragon Unit) and 120 Send-off and Welcoming Ceremonies for Replacement Troops (1966–1972, in Pusan and Ch’unch’ŏn) (Won, Ho-chŏ 1974: 394–395).

for the period from 1965 to 1972.²² Foreign exchange earned in or in connection with Vietnam enabled Korea to build the infrastructure required to pursue its economic development plans and laid the foundation of the Korean economy's rapid growth from the middle of the 1960s onwards.

In addition to the earnings of soldiers dispatched to Vietnam, these sums include the income of engineers dispatched to construction work in Vietnam by private companies such as Hyundai Engineering and Construction and Hanjin and by the Korean Overseas Development Corporation. Park Chung Hee's political companion Chŏng Ilgwŏn recalls in his memoirs that Park may have cited anti-communism as the grand and noble reason for pursuing a deployment of troops to Vietnam almost as soon as he had seized power but inwardly hoped to recreate for Korea the kind of economic benefits Japan had been able to reap during the times of the Korean War (Yun 2012: 290).

After 1965, the realisation of such hopes seemed to be within reach, and in a message to the Korean people of January 1966 Park declared he would complete "the modernisation of the homeland" by the second half of the 1970s. He continued to proclaim that "[i]f the path to unification leads through the modernisation of the homeland, and if the path to modernisation leads through a self-reliant economy, then self-reliance is the first step towards unification", thereby presenting a logic for his rule over Korea that linked the notions of unification, modernisation and self-reliance.²³ He had thus found his own way of connecting the notions of "modernisation" and "the nation" (*ibid.*).

Anti-communist developmental dictatorship

Park Chung Hee succeeded in the presidential elections of 3 May 1967 on the strength of the electorate's expectations for economic growth. In the legislative elections of 8 June in the same year, his ruling party equally secured a victory. However, this election, which won the ruling party a number of seats that would allow it to pass constitutional amendments, was widely criticised as rigged because there had been an all-out mobilisation of government resources to ensure the ruling party's victory. Again, nationwide protests ensued.

While South Koreans were largely supportive of the deployment of troops to Vietnam, intertwined as it had become with the notions of anti-communism

22 The ROK received about \$238.7 million through trade and \$753 million in other non-trade revenues, including military remittances, workers' remittances and compensation for casualties. According to a document released by Seoul's foreign ministry in 2005, South Korea earned a total of \$5 billion in foreign currency from the dispatch of troops to Vietnam, including \$1 billion in military aid, \$1 billion in U.S. military expenses, \$1 billion in Vietnam special aid and \$2 billion in technology transfer and export promotion assistance between 1965 and 1973. (*Yonhap News*, 26 August 2005).

23 New Year's Speech by Park Chung Hee on 18 January 1966, http://pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&artid=1305648&cctid=c_pa02062 (accessed 20 June 2020).

and modernisation, they protested fiercely against the rigged elections and the accompanying violation of democratic principles. However, the Park Chung Hee government in 1967 instrumentalised anti-communism to suppress the protest movements just as it had done during the June 3 Resistance Movement in 1964. Only this time, Park Chung Hee did not declare martial law, but instead chose to fabricate a spy incident (see next paragraph). He capitalised on the fact that the number of armed confrontations in the demilitarised zone was increasing to further his domestic political aims.

What is referred to in contemporary Korean historiography as the “East Berlin Incident of 1967” is a case in point. On 8 July 1967, Koreans living in West Germany and other parts of Europe were secretly abducted to South Korea and placed into confinement on the pretext that they had engaged in spying activities on behalf of the North on the basis of instructions received through the North Korean embassy in East Berlin.²⁴ The West German government protested against these events to the point where it stated it would have to reconsider its diplomatic relations with South Korea. The Park Chung Hee government was fully aware of the dangers of its conduct from the diplomatic point of view, but silencing the voices of the intellectuals who opposed the constitutional revision that was the first in a number of steps aimed at allowing him to stay in power indefinitely was, to Park Chung Hee, the more urgent problem. Anti-communism was the best tool available to do just that. North Korea’s bold claim in 1966 that it would achieve unification of the Korean peninsula under communist rule by early 1970 greatly helped the South’s anti-communist policies (Lankov 2013: 30–31).

By the second half of the 1960s, the notion of anti-communism had taken on the additional, more specific meaning of a “victory over communism” in the contest of economic systems. This is proof of the extent to which the Park Chung Hee government had become confident of its plans for economic development.²⁵ In parallel with opening a new front against the North in the form of a rivalry in the contest of economic systems, the Park Chung Hee government systematically pursued its mission of bringing about an internalisation of anti-communist ideology in South Korean society. This meant developing the notion of “the spy within” who poses a threat to national security and ensuring that such discourse became an integrated part of everyday life. Anti-communist education was practised in kindergartens and elementary schools to the point where children came to believe that communists were “red devils with horns”. The Park Chung Hee government was aiming to thereby win control over its citizens’ very way of thinking. The small- and large-scale armed confrontations that continued to occur in the demilitarised zone – coupled with incidents such

24 The South Korean Truth Commission has ascertained that this incident was a case of pure political manoeuvring (Hankyoreh 2006); for more information on the East Berlin Incident see Lee 2007: 96.

25 At that time, North Korea still enjoyed economic superiority over the South, cf. CIA 1972: 3–4.

as North Korean guerrilla forces penetrating as far as the Blue House in Seoul and the North Korean capture of the USS Pueblo – were mobilised as instruments of propaganda in this undertaking of bringing about an internalisation of anti-communist ideology in South Korean society.

In 1968, having gained confidence from the success of its economic policies, the Park Chung Hee government began opposing the US government on the issue of how to deal with North Korea. This was in stark contrast to the situation in the first half of the 1960s, when Park Chung Hee had been highly conscious of the US government's interests and eager to please them in order to secure the continuation of his rule.²⁶ It was, not least, an expression of the extent to which the Korean troops had gained in relevance in the Vietnam War. Regarding the North Korean raid on the Blue House on 21 January 1968 and the capture of the USS Pueblo only two days later, on 23 January, Park Chung Hee strongly objected to the fact that the United States focused its efforts on trying to bring about a release of the Pueblo's crew through bilateral discussions with the North Koreans and that the US pressed him for assurances that South Korean troops would not carry out retaliatory attacks against the North in spite of the North Korean attempt on his and his family's lives.²⁷ Park, who had lost faith in the United States, began planning for the creation of an "independent national defence"²⁸ – forming a two and a half million-strong homeland reserve force in April 1968.

At a time when students in the United States, Japan and Western Europe were filling the streets in anti-war and pro-peace demonstrations, South Korea's authoritarian ruler, with the aim of staying in power indefinitely, established a system of tight control over Korean citizens in the name of fighting against, and competing with, the North.²⁹ His achievements in economic development granted legitimacy to his policies because all Koreans agreed on the value of "modernisation" as a means to overcome poverty. Even the university students and intellectuals who denounced Park's constitutional amendments aimed at removing limitations to his rule as anti-democratic and took to the streets to oppose them did so demanding "the modernisation of the homeland and a truly

26 Document 182, Letter from the Ambassador to Korea (Porter, William J.) to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy, William P.), Seoul, 27 February 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

27 North Korea sent 31 commandos into Seoul to assassinate Park Chung Hee. The infiltrators made it to the first gate of the Blue House before they were stopped and eventually killed. Document 181, Memorandum from Cyrus R. Vance to President Johnson, Washington, 20 February 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea; see also Document 190, Telegram from the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson in Texas, Washington, 13 April 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

28 Document 183, Telegram from the Commander of United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel, General Charles H., III) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp, Admiral Ulysses S. Grant), Seoul, 29 February 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea.

29 The resident registration system introduced in November 1968 is a representative example. After the Blue House Raid incident a resident registration system was established to identify all residents of the country and to trace potential North Korean guerrillas or spies.

democratic order” and with the proud assurance that none other than they themselves were the “spearhead of the movement for modernisation”. The Korean media equated the protests abroad with “disorder” and spoke disparagingly of them as an amusement for the already satiated (Hwang 2018: 47). In fact, Korean elites who had previously referenced the West in their endeavours to familiarise the Korean public with their strategies for modernisation took the protests of 1968 in the West as a warning that similar events might unfold in Korea if it were to undergo a Western form of modernisation. As a consequence, they started emphasising that Korea had a cultural tradition and a morality that was different from the West. Such was the societal and political context behind the proclamation of the Charter of National Education in November 1968.³⁰

The Park Chung Hee government ordered that this Charter of National Education, which begins with the words “We were born on this land with the historic mission of reviving the Korean nation” be recited in all schools and at all formal public events. This was a process of instilling in all Koreans a sense that each and every one of them bore individual responsibility for the morals and values of the nation as a whole – all in the beautiful name of national modernisation. Notably, “Koreans” in this sense were the citizens of the South only, united as they were by their shared anti-communism. A new notion of the nation revolving around the axis of anti-communism coupled with modernisation had been developed. This was fundamentally different from the concept of the Korean people as one nation uniting Koreans living in the South and the North.³¹

The Park Chung Hee government would not tolerate any expression of goodwill on the part of South Koreans towards the North. To Park, the North was nothing but an enemy waiting to attack the South and force it into unification under communism. He made this unambiguously clear in talks with newly elected US president Richard Nixon in August 1969. Park gathered from the talks with Nixon that the United States intended to end the war in Vietnam, start talks with the Soviet Union and China and, ultimately, withdraw their troops from South Korea. He said to Nixon that “Kim [the leader of North Korea] will provoke a war if he believes that [the] American policy toward the ROK is going to change or has changed”, adding: “The strengthening of ROK defence would check these provocations of Kim and have him give up the idea of invading the South by force. A way to achieve this objective is to strengthen the equipment and combat capability of the ROK forces.”³² At a later stage,

30 This Charter was closely modelled on the Meiji Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 (see Elfving-Hwang 2011: 46).

31 It is here that the political conflict referred to in present-day Korean society as *namnamgaldŭng* (South-South conflict, referring to progressives vs. rightist conservatives) has its roots.

32 Document 35, Memorandum of Conversation, San Francisco, California, 21 August 1969, Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume XIX, Part 1, Korea, 1969–1972.

Park also started planning for the development of atomic weapons (see Snyder 2018) with a view to building an independent system of national defence, all the while continuing his work on a master plan for prolonging his rule.

On 14 September 1969, the Korean National Assembly passed a draft for a constitutional amendment that would put Park Chung Hee in a position to stand in the presidential elections for a third time. This completed the framework for the realisation of an anti-communist developmental dictatorship. Democracy was excluded from this alliance between anti-communism, modernisation, and South Korean nationalism. The decade of the Korean 1960s, which had begun with the democratic revolution of 19 April 1960 led by students and workers opposing the rigged elections of the month before, was now ending with the completion of an anti-communist developmental dictatorship that was the result of the shifting notions of modernisation, anti-communism, the nation and democracy.

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