

## **To Realize Our Decolonization: South Korea's Deployment of Troops to Vietnam\***

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### **Introduction**

In the 1960s, only fifteen years after its liberation from Japanese colonial rule, South Korea was still struggling to establish its position in the postwar international order. In order to secure its international position, the country had to navigate the dual and intertwined waves of that era: decolonization and the Cold War. In the context of decolonization, this period offered the country a new opportunity to establish an independent, modern nation-state. However, the Cold War arrived early in Korea and stunted Korea's initial decolonization process after 1945. Koreans' desire to decolonize their country first manifested themselves in protests, such as the People's Committees' demands and the Cheju uprising against policies of the U.S. military government in Korea, but American dominance re-framed South Korean conceptualization of decolonization through a Cold War lens. The peninsula soon became a field of competition where South Korea and North Korea each appealed to the world that they were the

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only legitimate, modern nation-state on the Korean Peninsula. Within such a temporal space, the Vietnam War was the battlefield where South Korea chose to depict itself as a full-fledged, independent nation-state.

Decolonization cannot be realized in a single dramatic moment of declaring independence, but rather it is an extended process. According to historian Stein Tønnesson, decolonization can be defined as the process by which subordinated territories become sovereign and independent states. He identified several steps to be realized for successful decolonization: a government must be formed locally and must be able to represent the entire population, the government must be assigned sovereignty and territory by the colonial power, and, finally, the new state must receive international recognition – especially through membership in the United Nations [UN].<sup>1</sup> Among these, the final step is an essential condition to belonging to the international order and shapes the sovereign nation-state system itself. While often overlooked in both scholarly discussion and popular imagination of the history of post-liberation Korea, the step of gaining international recognition as an independent nation-state was indispensable to the country's long and hard decolonization process.

Indeed, many of Korea's major decisions, including the one to send troops to Vietnam, were aimed at achieving international recognition as an independent nation-state. Given that Ernst Fraenkel, a legal adviser to United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), defined the Korean Peninsula as *terra nullius* after the Japanese surrender in 1945, Korea's nation-building project constituted a relentless journey transforming a land of despair and destruction to a full-blown sovereign nation-state.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of the journey were the country's unceasing attempts

1 Stein Tønnesson, "National Divisions in Indochina's Decolonization," *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then* (London: Routledge, 2003), 253-277.

2 In a report titled *Structure of US Military Government in Korea*, Fraenkel noted that even if Korea was separated from the Japanese Empire, the pre-annexation state would not be resurrected, nor would a new Korea be established, so sovereignty over the Korean Peninsula would naturally belong to the military government. Shin Bokryong, "Ernst Fraenkel report[pogosō]," *hankukpuntsansalyochip*

to gain UN membership – and thus international recognition. The attempts encompassed such steps as the Peace Line Declaration in 1952, the Korea-U.S. Administrative Agreement in 1966, and the subsequent Korea-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement [SOFA]. Each of these steps, in turn, constituted part of the country's larger project of converting its nominal sovereignty – affirmed with the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 – to *de-facto* sovereignty. The deployment of troops to Vietnam should be understood as a key part of this nation-building project.

The discussions on the deployment of troops, however, have largely ignored this aspect of demonstrating sovereignty in the international arena. Instead, they have focused narrowly on the perennial question of whether or not South Korea had agency in this decision. Most notably, Han Sung-joo argued that the United States forced South Korea to send its troops to Vietnam, emphasizing the unequal power relationship between the two countries. Despite its merits, Han's focus on U.S. enforcement and Korean subordination nonetheless underestimates the agency of the South Korean government.<sup>3</sup> Rather than a reluctant participant, Korea was an active player who saw the Vietnam war as a fateful opportunity and grasped it readily, even aggressively. One clear evidence of this is that Park Chōnghŭi offered the John F. Kennedy administration to dispatch troops before the election of Lyndon B. Johnson.

The rediscovery of the agency of the Korean government caused a new swing of scholarly discussion, but the question of sovereignty and international recognition remained sidelined. The new pivotal question was concerned with what motivated Korea to propose joining the American war effort in Vietnam. One group of researchers evaluated the deployment of troops in its security context and argued that South Korea's proposal was a kind of preventive measure to deter the withdrawal of U.S. troops from

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III-1 (Seoul: wŏnchumunhwasa, 1993), 30-31.

3 Han Sungjoo, "South Korea's Participation in the Vietnam Conflict," *Orbis* 21:4 (Winter 1978).

the Korean Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> Others stressed economic interests over national security, insisting that the Korean leaders fixed their eyes more than anything else on Special War Procurement [*Chōnchaeng T'ŭksu*] in munitions and in the light industry sector.<sup>5</sup> In this debate, scholars have tended to discuss the underlying motives for Korea's participation in the Vietnam War simply by highlighting either security or economic interest, or both. Of course, there are a few noteworthy exceptions, especially Heo Eun's work that highlighted South Korea's desire to elevate its national prestige.<sup>6</sup> This current research, indebted to Heo's insight, expands the discussions on South Korea's motivations to deploy its troops to Vietnam beyond the security-versus-economic interest framework by focusing on its leaders' eagerness to gain international recognition.

Theoretically, this paper operates at the intersection of Prasenjit Duara's discourse on nationalism and Odd Arne Westad's historicization of the Cold War. According to Duara, sovereignty of one nation-state is coordinated and monitored by others, hence each nation-state must constantly substantiate its sovereignty. In this process, the desire to be recognized as a sovereign nation-state becomes the overriding goal of each and every nation-state.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Westad demonstrates that for the Third World, the Cold War was a continuation of colonialism before 1945, and the local elites in the Third World had agency to participate in the Cold War for

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4 Jeong Suyong, "South Korea's Deployment Troops to Vietnam and the Changes in the Alliance System between South Korea and the United States," (PhD diss, Korea University, 2001); Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "In the Service of Pharaoh? The United States and the Development of Korean Troops in Vietnam, 1965~1968," *Pacific Historical Review* 68:3 (August 1999).

5 Choi Dongku, "The Background to Korea's Involvement in the Second Indochina War," *Hankukchōngch'ihakhoepo* 30:2 (August 1996); John Lie, *Han Unbound: The Political Economy of South Korea* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

6 Heo Eun, "Korean Identity and colonialism In the Total War of the 20th Century," *Hankuksayōnku* 150 (September 2010).

7 Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 19-20, 33.

their own purposes.<sup>8</sup> Reading Duara and Westad side by side provides us with a set of implications. First, gaining international recognition is essential to a nation-state's survival in the modern international order. Second, this international recognition is particularly crucial for the newborn nation-state in the Third World because this process is indispensable to preventing their recolonization in the postwar order as a continuum of neo-colonialism. Third, and finally, Third World leaders have agency to use the Cold War to gain international recognition, which in turn realizes their goals of decolonization.

In the 1960s, many Koreans believed that the twentieth century was still for the survival of the fittest. Colonialism remained, afflicting their country's present and future. This perception conditioned the South Korean government's decision to send troops to Vietnam. South Korea had not yet joined the UN and had not been recognized by many countries in the 1960s. Even more telling, the United States and Japan treated South Korea as a semi-sovereign state, evinced through the 1965 Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty and the 1966 SOFA, respectively.<sup>9</sup> This postwar situation reminded the South Korean leaders and people of their humiliating experiences under Japanese colonialism in which their national sovereignty was forcefully exterminated. And a looming fear of recolonization conditioned by lingering colonial experiences, I contend, led the South Korean government to adopt a method most familiar to them to defend their sovereignty. They sought, in other words, to gain international recognition through participation in war: by demonstrating their military power and by leading wartime international conferences, just as the Japa-

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8 Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 396-398.

9 SOFA maintained extraterritorial privileges for U.S. troops in South Korea and Normalization Treaty with Japan intensified Korean's fear of recolonization. In this regard, Brown, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea, once mentioned that sovereignty and national prestige are the most sensitive issues in Asia. Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, 26 April 1966, [Volume XXIX, Part1, Korea, FRUS 1964-1968]

nese had done before 1945. This logic also explains why the method to gain international recognition through military force had widespread legitimacy from the Korean society in general. Even intellectuals and opposition politicians strongly agreed with the government that their country should attain international recognition using all possible methods, including force.

This paper consists of three sections. The first section reveals what challenges the newborn South Korean state faced by looking into the Korean officials' and intellectuals' assessments of the international order of the 1960s. The second section examines what motivated and conditioned the South Korean government to choose military operations to gain its international recognition. The last section explains how South Korea's use of force was legitimized politically and socially. In developing this narrative, this paper uses a diverse collection of primary sources, including the recently released Presidential Secretaries Report [*Taet'ongnyŏng pisŏsil pogo*] on the Vietnam situation, records of the National Defense Commission, the memoirs of Foreign Minister Ri Tongwŏn, and the major intellectual magazine, *Sasanggye*. By investigating South Korea's offer to the United States to dispatch troops to Vietnam to realize its own decolonization agenda and the Korean society's acquiescence of this move in the context of decolonization, this study will enrich our understanding of decolonization, United States-South Korea relations, and the international history of the Vietnam War.

### **The South Korean perspective on the mid-twentieth century international order**

On September 20, 1963, Kim Chongp'il, the main figure of the May 1961 military coup d'état in South Korea and former head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, delivered a graduation speech at Fairleigh Dickinson University in the United States. Kim addressed the dignitaries present and the American talents who would lead the free world by speak-

ing about South Korea's concerns as a developing country and its political vision for modernization:

Today, we live in a world where superiority and inferiority are markedly divided, which is expressed in terms of advanced and backward, enlightened and uncivilized, and prosperity and poverty... If the nineteenth century was the era of imperialism, the twentieth century can be said to be the era of nationalism in which the Asian countries are free from colonization and seeking their independence and self-reliance. However, another characteristic of today is the fact that many backward democratic countries are effectively limited in their sovereignty by a few great powers...<sup>10</sup>

In Kim's estimation, the world had not changed much since the nineteenth century. The world was still divided between supposedly superior and inferior nations, and the sovereignty of "backward" democratic countries was still undermined by the great powers. In the second half of the speech, moreover, Kim cited the phenomenon of power concentration as one of the political climates of the twentieth century and stressed that even in advanced democracies, the freedom and authority of the people are achieved only through national actions at home and abroad, and in the process, the administrations of each country continuously strengthen their leadership.

This understanding of the world situation was pervasive in Korean society. For example, in 1968, a *Chosun Ilbo* editorial wrote that in a system that judges the status of a nation-state by national power, the wealth and military strength of a country [*Pukuk Kangpyŏng*] determines whether a country is considered advanced or backward, developed or underdeveloped. *Donga Ilbo's* 1969 New Year's editorial also highlighted the need

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10 Kim Chongp'il, "Leadership of a backward democratic state," Invitation speech for graduation ceremony at Fairy Dickinson University in the United States (1963).

to enhance the wealth and military strength of a state.<sup>11</sup> For Koreans, the post-liberation world was not an international system of equal sovereign nation-states, but rather still very much reminiscent of the nineteenth-century international system of Darwinian survival of the fittest. Such a perspective was especially evident among the parliamentarians in the National Assembly, who were more sensitive to external pressures or violations of sovereignty than anyone else in South Korea. On September 9, 1960, Rep. Chang T'aeksang emphasized that the Korea-U.S. joint deliberation on the national budget was a violation of the most important fiscal right of national sovereignty and was reminiscent of the era of Korea's annexation by Japan.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, three days later, thirty-one lawmakers emphatically declared that Korea should do all its business as a sovereign nation-state by signing the SOFA. They thought that South Korea should have the authority as an independent state to deal with crimes committed by U.S. soldiers against Koreans.<sup>13</sup> While South Korea received massive military and economic aid from the United States, this period was a time when heavy criticism of the country's weakness as a sovereign state erupted.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, South Korea's weak presence on the international stage, like at the UN, further amplified the new state's longing for substantiated sovereignty. The new South Korean Foreign Minister Chŏng Ilhyŏng's experience at the Fifteenth UN General Assembly on September 20, 1960, clearly reveals another problem that the fledgling country faced at the time, besides security or economic issues. At the general meeting, while thirteen African countries and Cyprus were approved to join the UN and the Assembly discussed the issue of Korea's unification, Chŏng could

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11 *Chosun Ilbo* [*Chosun Daily*], 3 December 1968; *Donga Ilbo* [*Donga Daily*], 1 January 1969.

12 *National Assembly Records*, 9 September 1960.

13 *National Assembly Records*, 10 September 1960.

14 Heo Eun, "A Study on Cold War Nationalism and its Effect on The Formation of a Cultural Identity in a Divided Korea," *Hankuksayŏnku* 43 (May 2011), 220-226.

only inform representatives of each country about his newborn nation-state in the hope of subsequently gaining membership to the UN:

“The current president of our country is Yun Posŏn, not Chiang Kai-shek.” Then representatives of other countries said, “Ah, it has changed, it has changed.” I had to impart basic knowledge about our nation-state to representatives, such as Korea is an independent state located between Japan and China, and it is now divided into south and north. Then, I asked them for support for Korea’s joining the UN, but they kept asking whether white races ruled Korea before. “We are a sovereign nation-state, and we are independent,” I repeated. They replied, “Oh, well, why don’t we cooperate with the same people of color?”<sup>15</sup>

Chŏng had to constantly preach to the UN General Assembly that Korea is a sovereign, independent state and that Korea’s history is different from the one of China and Japan. In the international vote for UN membership, the votes of the neutral states that had just joined the UN were valuable. To gain these votes, South Korea had to make other neutral nation-states aware of its unique history no matter whether its sovereignty had been nominally approved by the United States and other free countries. In other words, the acquisition of UN membership first required the awareness of South Korea’s existence as a newly independent nation-state, followed by actual recognition of its sovereignty from other countries.

However, not everyone agreed with Chŏng’s UN route to gain international recognition from neutral states. Rep. Kim Ŭngjo cited the 1956 Hungarian incident, arguing that the UN’s enforcement capabilities were weak against powerful countries and strong only against weak ones. According to Kim, a relatively weak South Korea had to maintain substantive power, such as via military self-reliance and by establishing a close circle of Korean War co-belligerents, to affirm its genuine independence

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15 *National Assembly Records*, 3 December 1960.

rather than doing so by establishing relations with various neutral states so as to join the UN.<sup>16</sup> In this context, Democratic Party lawmakers Ri P'ilsŏn and Yu Ok'u also consented to Kim by emphasizing that all international diplomatic actions were currently being conducted by powerful nations.<sup>17</sup> In sum, to join the UN and secure its place in the international community, Chŏng sought to substantiate Korea's sovereignty through gaining recognitions from various young and neutral countries, while Kim and others thought that it was more important to building up Korean military self-sufficiency or through the formation of alliances with co-belligerents to bolster the country's international standing.

Despite the differences in these methods, the goal of both Chŏng and Kim was the establishment of substantial national sovereignty. And such a goal reveals that South Korea's mission in the 1960s was clearly to build a completely independent and sovereign nation-state, that is, to realize decolonization. The unity of the end goal of both diplomatic routes means that Chŏng's idea had the same legitimacy in the context of decolonization as did Kim's thought. Hence it was easy for politicians and intellectuals to switch their positions between these two diplomatic routes. But, as I elaborate in the following sections, as the postwar international order intensified South Korea's painful memory of colonization, Chŏng's route was harder to defend in both political and social arenas; eventually, Chŏng himself defected to Kim's method.

### **Unchanged times, continuing colonial legacies**

South Koreans' view of the world in the 1960s was not much different from how they understood the world order in the nineteenth century. Less than two decades after liberation, the sovereignty of their nation-state was still precarious. Indeed, the United States and Japan seemed likely to in-

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16 *National Assembly Records*, 10 September 1960.

17 *National Assembly Records*, 1 November 1960.

fringe on South Korea's sovereignty, demonstrated through such cases as the American government strongly pressuring South Korea to accept the 1965 Normalization Treaty with Japan. Furthermore, North Korea was actively challenging South Korea's sovereignty by kidnapping its fishermen across the border and by employing aggressive diplomatic policy toward neutral states.<sup>18</sup> In other words, South Korean's chronic anxiety about their country's unstable sovereignty was not the result of excessive paranoia. In this regard, historical sociologist Kim Hakjae asserted that the Cold War was fundamentally an international hierarchy constructed by Western nation-states so that the sovereignty of the Third World nation-states could be selectively recognized or denied.<sup>19</sup> South Koreans' longing for substantive sovereignty in such a world, thus, is understandable.

Moreover, through their experience of colonization, Koreans knew very well how to navigate this kind of international order. The surest means of attaining recognition as an independent nation-state at the end of the nineteenth century primarily entailed engaging in warfare, recognized by other nation-states as a measure of a nation's industrial capability and modernization. Additionally, leading wartime international conferences and agreements represented acts that raised national sovereignty and status. For intellectuals and politicians, these two actions were the legacies that they inherited from experiences at the end of nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century. Expanding national sovereignty through force, in fact, was the ethos and policy that the Great Korean Empire [Taehan Chekuk 1897-1910] had pursued in order to maintain its independence in the throes of imperial inclusion with the motto "Enhancing

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18 Regarding the abduction of South Korean fishermen by North Korea, Kim Ŭngcho also argued that "the sovereignty of this country, recognized by the absolute majority of free friends in the world, has temporarily collapsed." *National Assembly Records*, 13 April 1961.

19 Kim Hakjae, *The Origin of the Panmunjom System* (Seoul: Humánitas, 2015), 141-157, 375-358.

the Wealth and Military Strength of a Country” since the end of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, this ethos was more acute in Korea because its sovereignty had been extinguished in 1910 by that very ethos in the policies of the Japanese Empire. As Carter Eckert noted, under Japanese rule, Koreans internalized militarism even more deeply than before the annexation, and this ethos was passed down to Park Chŏnghŭi’s generation. In the textbook used by Korean cadets in the Japanese imperial military academy, the Russo-Japanese War was described as “a war that revealed Japan’s military power to the world and made it the world’s highest-ranking nation”; this phrase strongly implies the historical continuity of the ethos of expanding sovereignty through force.<sup>20</sup> In this context, as we’ve seen in the first section, Rep. Kim Ŭngjo, a cadet of the Manchuria Central Army Training Center during Japanese rule, insisted in the National Assembly that military independence is one of the principal factors guaranteeing the country’s true independence.<sup>21</sup>

This ethos of militarism had penetrated Korea from the colonial period to the early days of post-liberation and formed the core of South Korea’s perception of the international order in the mid-twentieth century. Given that Korea endured several wars throughout this period, from the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s and the Pacific War in the 1940s to the Korean War in the 1950s, it is understandable that South Korea in the 1960s was familiar to war and militarism. Moreover, with this ethos, South Korea began to see Southeast Asia as a stepping-stone to becoming an independent nation-state. In 1954, Rhee Sŭngman (Syngman Rhee) wanted Korea to become a center of the Asian People’s Anti-Communist League [APACL], thereby serving as a model of anti-communism and anti-imperialism to counter the ambitions of China, the Soviet Union, and Ja-

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20 Carter Eckert, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism, 1866–1945* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 55-73, 81-93, 129.

21 *National Assembly Records*, 10 September 1960.

pan.<sup>22</sup> As a part of his plan, Rhee even suggested to U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower to dispatch a volunteer army to Indochina in 1954.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, three years later, Ch'oe Töksin, who had become the first ambassador to Vietnam, reported to his President that Southeast Asia was facing the “Two-Fold Danger” of communism from the Soviet Union and China as well as imperialism from Japan. Ch'oe also suggested that South Korea should take the diplomatic initiative by using this danger to induce neutral states into the anti-communist and anti-imperialist camp.<sup>24</sup> Through the deployment of troops to Indochina and by leading Southeast Asia to the Free World, both Rhee and Ch'oe tried to gain other nation-states' recognition of South Korea as an independent state.

Adoption of that method to affirm sovereignty is more evident during the Park Chŏnghŭi administration. First, Park's overseas tour and the signing of treaties with foreign countries in the 1960s were expressed as an extension of South Korea's sovereignty and framed as improving the country's international status. Regarding Park's visit to West Germany in December 1964, *Kyunghyang Shinmun* emphasized, “In terms of being the first head of state to travel to Europe, it has a political significance of broadening the scope of diplomatic actions as a sovereign state more than economic significance.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Park tried to expand national sovereignty by deploying troops to Vietnam, much like Rhee Sŭngman. By November 1961, Park had already visited the United States and proposed to President John F. Kennedy about his willingness to send troops to Vietnam. Subsequently, in support of Lyndon B. Johnson's “more flags” policy, the South Korean government deployed noncombatants to Vietnam for the first time in May 1964.<sup>26</sup>

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22 Cho Moohyung, “The Establishment and Decline of APACL,” *SekyeChŏngch'i* 10, (Winter 2008), 211-213.

23 Yoon Chungro, *Social History of the Vietnam War* (Seoul: P'ulŭnyŏksa, 2015), 82.

24 Draft Letter from Saigon for Heads of State, 19 December 1957, [B-334-003]

25 *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (Kyunghyang Press), 17 September 1964; *Chosun Ilbo*, 9 April 1967.

26 Park Taegyun, *The Vietnam War* (Seoul: Hankyŏryech'ulp'an, 2015), 23.

The motivation underlying Park's repeated proposals to send troops had much to do with gaining international recognition and reflected his perception of the international order. In January 1965, Yang Talsŭng, an official in the Presidential Secretariat, received a request for reinforcement from the United States, and immediately reported to his President about the pros and cons of sending more troops the next day. According to Yang, the main disadvantages of deployment were the neutral states' antipathy toward South Korea and the loss of the "pluralistic diplomacy" [*Tawŏn Oekyo*] that had been accumulated through visits to Germany and neutral countries, while the corresponding advantages were cultivating the solidarity of Asian anti-communist countries.<sup>27</sup> The Park administration was deeply troubled by potentially losing pluralistic diplomacy, but it was already evident that South Korea's government could not gain the upper hand in neutral state diplomacy anyways because of the success of China's atomic bomb test in October 1964 as well as the diplomatic offensive of China and North Korea in newly neutral African countries.<sup>28</sup> Already in his 1965 State of the Nation Message, Park mentioned that South Korea must only seek practical diplomacy toward free countries because all countries were increasingly pursuing their own interests.<sup>29</sup> Given that he had stressed pluralistic diplomacy in the State of the Nation Message the previous year, emphasizing how that strategy would enhance Korea's international status as a fortress of democracy, this was a remarkable diplomatic shift.<sup>30</sup> Such a vision is well-expressed in the *Journal of Korean National Security* [*Hankuk Anchŏnpochang Nonch'ong*]. Kim Chŏngnyŏl, who graduated from the Japanese Military Academy and served as Air

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27 *Presidential Secretaries Report*, 6 January 1965, [65-7].

28 Kim Domin, "A Study on the Diplomacy of South and North Korea towards 'Neutral Countries' from 1948 to 1968," (PhD diss, Seoul National University, 2020), 229-230.

29 *President Park Chŏnghŭi's collection of speeches* [*Pakchŏnghŭi taet'ongnyŏng yŏnsŏlmunjip*], 16 January 1965.

30 *President Park Chŏnghŭi's collection of speeches*, 10 January 1964.

Force Chief of Staff, wrote that human society consists of the dynamic relationship between the effort to preserve oneself and the desire to dominate others for personal prosperity.<sup>31</sup> In this context, Kim Yŏngchun, a professor at the National Defense University, argued that force is necessary to realistically ensure national sovereignty in the international order, and he also emphasized that in the “age of national interest [*KukkaIik ūi Sitae*]” of the 1960s, Korea’s deployment of troops to Vietnam was based on national interest rather than ideology.<sup>32</sup>

In this regard, Yang Talsŭng, who had reported the pros and cons of deployment in January 1965, suggested to Park Chŏnghŭi that an emergency meeting of the APACL should be convened by a reinforcement of noncombatants. He predicted that this meeting would draw attention to the Vietnam situation among members of the Security Council, South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and the APACL; consequently, various countries would send volunteer troops to Vietnam together with South Korea.<sup>33</sup> Based on Yang’s suggestion, some studies have focused on the South Korean government’s attempt to avoid deep involvement in the Vietnam War.<sup>34</sup> However, more noteworthy is Yang’s belief that South Korea could secure the initiative in the international conference through the deployment its troops. In this proposal, he ultimately asserted that South Korea could lead the APACL, which had previously been led by the United States through deployment of troops.

Such a prospect strongly indicates that the frame of expansion of sovereignty by force continued even into the 1960s. The continuing legacies

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31 Kim Chŏngryŏl, “A Historical Review of South Korea’s Security [*HankukAnchŏnpochangŭiSachŏkKoch'al*],” *HankukAnchŏnpochangNonch'ong* 1, (1968), 21.

32 Kim Yŏngchun, “Korea’s Security Theory [*HankukŭiAnchŏnpochanglon*],” *HankukAnchŏnpochangNonch'ong* 1, (1968), 46-52.

33 *Presidential Secretaries Report*, 7 January 1965, [65-8].

34 Song Jaegyong, “Lee Seung-man and Park Jeong-hi administrations’ plans to send Korean troops to Vietnam, and how the National Assembly responded,” *Yŏksa wa Hyŏnsil* 116, (June 2020), 46-48.

from nineteenth century became more evident with the deployment of combat troops in October 1965. Park Chŏnghŭi emphasized the necessity of equalizing the great powers and weaker nations through balanced prosperity in his speech at the Press Club in the United States on 18 May 1965. In the same speech, he stressed that the Korean government is focused on freedom – it is willing to sacrifice its people for it and needs to exercise power to maintain it. Park clearly expressed the desire of a new nation-state to expand its sovereignty amid American hegemony, an obsession with sovereignty as an unrecognized sovereign state despite its 4,000 years of history, and the importance of the exercise of force to realize these aspirations.<sup>35</sup>

The South Korean government, thus, actively deployed its troops to Vietnam and endeavored to lead wartime conferences in order to gain international recognition. As part of this project, the Korean government considered the Manila conference as a tool to enhance its international status. The diplomatic policy-makers thought that South Korea was only qualified to lead this meeting due to its military contribution in the Vietnam War.<sup>36</sup> Even from the view of an American official, Park equated the dispatch of Korean troops to obtaining regional leadership and, therefore, expanding international recognition of Korean sovereignty.<sup>37</sup> In various subsequent speeches, Park continued to combine troop deployment with South Korea's international recognition and described South Korea as a “full-blown sovereign state” after leading the Manila Summit Conference:

My fellow Koreans! I visited Vietnam and returned home after the Manila Summit Conference... At this conference, the largest

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35 *President Park Chŏnghŭi's collection of speeches*, 18 May 1965.

36 Lee Sanghyun, “Troop Contributing Nations Conference on Vietnam and ROK's Diplomacy During the 60's,” *Sahoekwahakyŏnku* 53:1, (June 2014), 322-344.

37 Telegram from Seoul (2199), 22 October 1966, [POL 7 PHIL, CF, Box 2584, RG59, NARA].

since World War II, I did my best to live up to the expectations and aspirations of the people... We have developed into a “full-blown sovereign nation” and escaped from the history of endurance and humiliation. ... Helping our good neighbors is also helping ourselves. In addition, before we are satisfied with these steady steps on the international stage, we must promote domestic development and prosperity.<sup>38</sup>

Park stressed that South Korea had become a “full-blown sovereign nation” based on Korea’s participation in the largest conference since World War II and asserted that it was escaping the history of colonial humiliation through the largest deployment of troops to Vietnam after the United States. Indeed, South Korea led two conferences in 1966 due to its decision to dispatch troops to Vietnam, thereby expanding its voice among the free world countries in Asia.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in his 1967 State of the Nation Message, Park Chŏnghŭi portrayed South Korea as having risen from the objective position to the subjective position in world history through the two conferences in 1966 and finally becoming a pathfinder in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>40</sup> Park, without doubt, regarded the deployment of troops to Vietnam as leverage to extend national sovereignty, besides sparking economic growth and modernizing its armed forces.

### **Reduced options for international recognition, obscured alternatives to military involvement**

In the 1960s, South Korea was on a journey to build itself into a mod-

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38 *President Park Chŏnghŭi’s collection of speeches*, 26 October 1966.

39 Park Taegyun, “An Idea of the East Asian Collective System for Security in the Era of Park Chung Hee,” *Sekyechŏngch’i* 14, (February 2011), 19.

40 *President Park Chŏnghŭi’s collection of speeches*, 17 January 1967.

ern nation-state. To do so, it sought to gain international recognition by engaging in war and international conferences, two actions viewed as legitimate in Korea due to the legacy of its colonial experiences. As mentioned in the first section, both diplomatic routes outlined in the remarks of Chŏng Ilhyŏng and Kim Ŭngjo had the ultimate goal of decolonization via gaining international recognition. South Koreans' perception of the postwar international order and the painful colonial legacy, however, obscured options other than employing military force through intervention in the Vietnam War to further their decolonization efforts. Circumstances blocked Chŏng's diplomatic route and even compelled him to change his stance on pluralistic diplomacy as the National Assembly discussed the first and second troop deployments to Vietnam. The purpose of the National Defense Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee joint meeting on July 30, 1964, dissimilar to previous studies, was not intended simply to express loyalty toward the United States. Rather, each member's remarks on various points, such as the economic consequences and questions of allowances for dispatched troops were all centered on South Korea's international recognition. In focusing on the deployment of troops abroad for the first time in its history, the general atmosphere of the National Assembly was sympathetic to this move. Kim Tonghwan, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, stated, "We should consider what Korea's international position will be after dispatching troops." And Rep. Han Sangjun stressed, "The deployment will have a great effect on military diplomacy." Of course, there were critics, like Rep. Kim Chŏnggŭn, who argued that special service allowances for contingent units were too high compared to the poor finances of the government, but he did not object to the deployment itself.<sup>41</sup>

This lack of objection was due to the tantalizing prospect of expanding Korea's sovereignty through the deployment of troops. Defense Minister Kim Sŏngŭn asserted, "Korea's international voice and status will be strengthened through the dispatch of troops." Similarly, Foreign Minister

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41 *National Assembly Records*, 30 July 1964.

Ri Tongwŏn said, “Through the deployment of troops, Korea can receive recognition from Southeast Asian countries including Thailand, and this authoritative recognition will broaden South Korea’s trades and commerce.”<sup>42</sup> As was the case for the acquisition of UN membership, international trade and commerce had to be premised on the recognition by other nation-states. Furthermore, the need for recognition was more evident in the issue of special mission incentive pay for dispatched troops. Kim Chŏnggŭn had previously argued that the allowance should be reduced by citing poverty throughout Korean society and the government’s fiscal austerity, but Kim and Ri explained that the essence of the allowance was related to national prestige. According to them, the deployment itself had broader implications for politics, the military, diplomacy, and the economy in general, so deployed soldiers, on behalf of Korea, had to appear superior to the units of other countries stationed in Vietnam.

Opposition lawmakers, including Chŏng Ilhyŏng, then-member of the Democratic Party of Korea, pointed out procedural problems with the administration-led practice, but generally supported the deployment itself due to its perceived effect on international recognition. In the same joint meeting, Chŏng stressed that “by deployment, the legal status and treatment of the dispatched South Korean troops under UN command should be discussed together, and in terms of special duty allowances, even if the country is poor, the government has to pay an appropriate amount to maintain its dignity.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, in a National Assembly joint meeting regarding the second deployment of troops on January 20, 1965, Chŏng emphasized that if the government was going to send more troops after this dispatch, “it would be more effective to send a large-scale unit of 100,000 or 200,000, not 2,000.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, he also argued that the Park Chŏnghŭi administration should send high-ranking troops, like a general, and bravely unite the ruling and opposition parties to

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 *National Assembly Records [Kukpangwiwŏnhoe Hoeüilok]*, 20 June 1965.

demonstrate the government's serious commitment both domestically and internationally. Chŏng's latter statement demonstrates how his previous diplomatic route had shifted to active support for deploying troops to Vietnam all in the hopes of legitimately gaining South Korea's international recognition.<sup>45</sup> In this context, other lawmakers' opposition was primarily confined to the benefits that could be obtained from the deployment rather than objections to the dispatch itself.<sup>46</sup> Of course, Republican lawmaker Park Chong'tae argued that the Vietnam War should be understood in the context of the Vietnamese nationalist movement, but most criticisms directly converged on the possibility that the deployment would not yield proper diplomatic and economic benefits.<sup>47</sup>

Foreign Minister Ri Tongwŏn, who oversaw the deployment of troops to Vietnam and the ASPAC, reflected upon how Koreans were blinded by these lofty goals at that time. When he went to study abroad in the UK during the ruins of the Korean War, he was haunted by the dilemma of when "will our East be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with them [*west*]?" The opportunity to explore this topic came to Lee when he spoke to Park Chŏnghŭi:

Mr. President, Korea's current position, especially in diplomacy, is shabby like a thatched house. If we want to overcome our *thatched-roof situation* [*emphasis added*] as soon as possible, we need to give the *modern building* [*emphasis added*] image to the outside world by *doing an extraordinary thing* [*ŏngttunghan il*] that others have not thought of. Only then will people pay attention and [*Korea*] will raise its voice on the international stage, which will be advantageous for trade and the gaining foreign

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45 Ibid.

46 Ma Sangyoon, "The Deployment of South Korean Troops to Vietnam and the Role of the National Assembly," *Kukchechiyŏkyŏnku* 22:2 (Summer 2013), 77, 175.

47 *National Assembly Records*, 5 August 1965.

loans.<sup>48</sup>

Ri Tongwŏn's developmental aspirations were caught between feelings of envy and inferiority toward Western civilization and dependent upon Korea's recovery and realization of its sovereignty, which would allow it to stand shoulder to shoulder with many modern, sovereign states. In a situation where Korea gained its sovereignty, previously squashed by the Japanese Empire, as a gift from the western powers in 1945 rather than as a result of a direct struggle, it had to do an unexpected, extraordinary thing to win the attention of other states and increase its voice. And this extraordinary thing was to hold an ASPAC by deploying troops; that is, using force to secure an international voice.

Without a doubt, the South Korean government viewed the Vietnam War as leverage to expand its sovereignty in light of an intensifying Cold War, which in turn further justified the deployment of troops to Vietnam. As such, the United States not only tolerated the restoration of French Indochinese colonialism but ultimately intervened directly in the war, wrapping its intervention in Cold War rhetoric, which turned confrontation between the Vietminh and France into a front line of the conflict between communism and capitalism rather than a colonial struggle.<sup>49</sup> As a result, South Korea's perception of the situation in Vietnam also changed. Shortly after liberation, Korean newspapers had presented the Vietnam issue as a clash between the Vietnamese aspiration to achieve national independence and the French imperialist desire for recolonization. But these "National and Asian wars" were later described as merely an ideological competition between Ho Chi Minh's left-wing and the opposing right-wing, as the South Korean government domestically adopted anti-communism ideology.<sup>50</sup> Behind this Cold War justification, government

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48 Ri Tongwŏn, *Missing the President*, (Seoul: Kolyŏwŏn, 1992), 159-163.

49 Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford University Press, 2008), ch2-ch4.

50 Im Chongmyong, "Post-liberation South Korean Newspapers and Their Represen-

officials in the 1960s showed off their neo-imperialist imagination cloaked in nationalism. Park Sunch'ŏn, the leader of the Democratic Justice Party who was officially opposed to dispatching troops, said that when she looked down at the plains of Vietnam in September 1966, she greedily “want[ed] to swallow it,” and she hoped “more Korean would come here to plant the Korean spirit [*hon*].”<sup>51</sup>

It seems quite contradictory that such neo-imperialistic imaginings abounded at a time when the Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty and unequal relations with the United States aroused concerns about recolonization. To untangle this contradiction, previous studies have argued that deployment of troops to Vietnam was possible simply because of the opposition intellectuals' negligence due to their concentration only on the Korea-U.S. Administrative Agreement and on protesting the Korea-Japan Normalization Treaty. As emphasized in this article, however, Korean society's lack of objections to South Korea's use of force stemmed from the expectation to gain international recognition of its sovereignty. Intellectuals' sense of nationalism itself made them unable to mount an active opposition to the deployment of troops to Vietnam. In this context, Kim Ryeosil noted that while intellectuals in the *Sasanggye*, which was a major producer of discourses about nationalism and democracy, opposed Japan-Korea Normalization Treaty and criticized Cold War neo-colonialism, they could not criticize the issue of dispatching troops to Vietnam.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, *Sasanggye* was not a magazine representing the entire South Korean intellectual society. Major editors, led by Chang Jun-ha, the right-wing nationalist, were mainly from the northwest region in the Korean Peninsula and took a positive attitude toward the May 1961 military coup

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tations of the Vietnamese War against France,” *Hankukmunhakyŏnkuhakhoe* 54 (October 2014), 96-101.

51 Yoon Chungro, *Social History of the Vietnam War*, 128-129.

52 Kim Ryeosil, “*Sasang-gye* Intellectuals' Perception on the Korea-Japan Treaty and Their Counter Logic,” *Hankukminchokmunhwa* 54 (February 2015), 177.

d'état at that time.<sup>53</sup> And there were small but clear voices against the deployment of troops to Vietnam within this magazine. At the 1966 *Sasanggye* discussion meeting, Pu Wanhyök, the only chief editor not from the northwest, argued that Korea should consider the Vietnam War as “a place where the overall problems of an underdeveloped country in the Third World manifested, rather than from the perspective of the Cold War, and the deployment of troops was an event in which South Korea’s colonialism manifested itself.”

Nonetheless, *Sasanggye* had the greatest influence on intellectual society. Along with 20,000 regular subscribers, it printed up to 70,000 in 1960, and in the late 1950s, “the custom of pretending to be a college student by carrying *Sasanggye*” had emerged.<sup>54</sup> And, as seen in the preface of the March 1965 issue, the editors of *Sasanggye* did not criticize the deployment of troops to Vietnam, but rather simply described it as “the first time in recent history that we have sent our national defense forces overseas.” Furthermore, they stressed that the government should specifically pursue national interests by sending troops and must demonstrate those interests to the public. For the editors, fierce criticism toward the government did not stem from its intervention in another country’s decolonization civil war or the conscription of the nation’s youth. Rather, criticism would only occur if the government failed to produce compensation for the troops dispatched to Vietnam.<sup>55</sup> Similar to the March 1965 editorials, Kim Tongsu, a mobile army surgical hospital doctor who went to Vietnam during the first deployment, posted his travelogue in *Sasanggye*. He described Vietnam as “a community without cooperation and cultural awareness” and said that he himself was “full of unspoken pride in enlightening the Vietnamese about the Korean way of life.” Furthermore, he

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53 Kim Kunwoo, *The designers of South Korea’s state-building* (Hongseong: Nüt’inamuch’aekpang, 2017), 85.

54 *Ibid.*, 48-62.

55 “Preface: Our Views on sending troops to Vietnam” (Kwöntuön: Wölnam P’apyöng e Taehan Uli üi Kyön hae), *Sasanggye* 13-3, 1965.

even asserted that raising of the national flag of South Korea [*T'aeKükki*] and chanting the national anthem to celebrate the opening of the Korean mobile army surgical hospital in South Vietnam marked a moment when South Korea had overcome its shameful past of reliance on aid.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in *Sasanggye*, articles that expressed opposition to troop deployment were a small minority. Whether or not they failed to overcome pro-Americanism or a national policy of anti-communism, most of Korean society could not detect the contradiction between their opposition to the normalization of Korea-Japan relations and their acquiescence to dispatching troops to Vietnam. Only twenty years after liberation, while receiving aid that indebted Korea to the great powers, and in the context of the unending Korean War, Korea's first overseas expansion and deployment of troops was a very significant opportunity to exhibit its power in order to garner international recognition and realize its decolonization.

## Conclusion

While security to physically protect its own political body and economic development to nourish its people may be prerequisites for all nation-states, for newly independent countries, recognition from other states is another priority. As evident in Chöng Ilhyöng's remarks at the National Assembly, obtaining UN membership through an international vote required focused efforts to make other countries aware of his country itself, and as Ri Tongwön's remark illustrates, South Korea had to receive substantive recognition for trade with Southeast Asian countries.

This article has focused on explaining the factors behind Korea's decision to deploy troops to Vietnam and on how the government gained domestic approval for this move. The deployment of troops to Vietnam was part of a larger struggle in which South Korea tried to claim its place in

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56 Kim Tongsu, "A Diary of Korean Army Medical Center to Vietnam" (Chuwölkuk-kunpyöngwönilchi - Hwalyöhan Kkoch' sokü Pikük), *Sasanggye* 145, 1965.

the international order as a modern, sovereign state at the crossroads of the Cold War and decolonization. In addition, this action fully reflects Korean national identity formed during the country's own experiences of colonization and the Korean perception toward the post-war international order. The deployment of troops was the best choice that Koreans could have made in the 1960s according to their own historical and international perceptions, and for this reason, contemporaries did not or could not see the inherent contradiction of opposing the normalization of Korea-Japan relations and supporting troop dispatch to Vietnam.

Of course, some voiced this contradiction. At the height of discussions about the third deployment, Republican Party Chairman Chŏng Kuyŏng told Ri Tongwŏn, "The Vietminh is just conducting a nationalist movement. But why do we have to aim at each other rather than help them? France and America are conducting military demonstrations as part of their colonial policy or showing off their imperial power."<sup>57</sup> A poet, Shin Tongyŏp, also pointed out this conflict in his poetry "Seoul."<sup>58</sup> For such figures, Korea's participation in an imperial war was an extreme self-contradiction that entailed denying its own wounds.

However, the large-scale project to restore the lost sovereignty of the nation overwhelmingly was met with popular domestic support. Chŏng Kuyŏng resigned from the Republican Party chairmanship, and opposition to the deployment of troops did not converge into a single discourse. Due to this trend, South Koreans lost many opportunities to shape the direction of their own decolonization. Alternative ways to improve Korea's international status, and voices which could have altered the militarized, Korean-style development path, were obscured; the voices of those directly mobilized by the state also became marginalized, hollow cries.

Nevertheless, South Korea today should clearly recognize not only the

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57 Ri Tongwŏn, *Taet'onglyŏng ŭl Kŭlimyŏ*, 126.

58 "The sound of drums leaving for Vietnam... The sound of banks crawling in an island country [Japan]... Motherland, you were not us." Shin Tongyŏp, "Seoul (1969)," *ShinTongyŏp Jŏnjip*, 1997.

aspirations of its liberation in 1945 but also the way those aspirations were realized in a context defined by the fear that their newborn country would not be recognized internationally. As former Foreign Ministers Chŏng Ilhyŏng and Ri Tongwŏn believed, and as this study emphasizes, recognition from other countries can be a prerequisite for bolstering international status and improving trade relations. With this in mind, an in-depth look at Korea's nation-building process through the deployment of troops to Vietnam can be of great use in imparting lessons for Korea's New Southern Policy [*Sin Nampang Chŏngch'aek*], with the goal of expanding its new diplomatic space in the strategic competition between the United States and China in Southeast Asia.

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<Abstract>

## To Realize Our Decolonization: South Korea's Deployment of Troops to Vietnam

*Dongil Shin*

In the 1960s, less than two decades after its liberation, South Korea was still struggling to establish its position in the postwar international order amid waves of decolonization and the Cold War. As a newly independent country, South Korea had one task it considered to be of utmost importance: gaining international recognition by demonstrating its sovereignty to the world. This article focuses on Korea's nation-building process in this context through the dispatch of its troops to Vietnam, a crucial component of completing its decolonization. The subsequent text assesses what factors influenced South Korea's deployment of troops to Vietnam and how this policy gained greater social acquiescence. Koreans perceived the postwar international order as little changed from the previous era of imperialism, when Korea's sovereignty had been forcefully usurped by Japan. This colonial experience, I contend, conditioned South Korea's decision to deploy troops to Vietnam; the South Korean government adopted a method familiar to them of showing off its military power to gain international recognition. This logic also explains why domestic actors generally viewed the troop dispatch as legitimate, including intellectuals and opposing politicians who agreed that their country should pursue international recognition using all possible methods, including force.

**Keywords:** South Korea, Vietnam War, Cold War, decolonization, deployment of troops, sovereignty

〈 국문초록 〉

## 우리의 탈식민화 실현을 위하여: 한국의 베트남 파병

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해방 후 20년이 채 되지 않은 1960년대, 한국은 탈식민화와 냉전의 물결 속에서 여전히 전후 국제질서 속 자신의 위치를 확고히 하기 위해 분투하고 있었다. 신생 독립국으로서, 한국이 당면한 가장 중요한 과제는 바로 그들의 주권을 세계에 증명하여 국제적인 인정을 받는 것이었다. 본고는 이러한 맥락에서 한국의 탈식민화를 완수하는데 결정적인 요소였던 베트남 파병을 통해 한국의 국가건설과정에 집중한다. 특히 한국의 파병에 어떤 요인들이 영향을 미쳤는지, 그리고 이 정책이 어떻게 사회적 목인을 얻을 수 있었는지에 대해 파고든다. 당시 한국인들은 전후 국제질서가 일본에 의해 강제로 주권을 빼앗겼던 이전의 제국주의 시대와 거의 다르지 않다고 인식했다. 그리고 필자는 이러한 식민지 경험이 한국의 베트남 파병 결정에 큰 영향을 미쳤다고 주장한다. 한국 정부는 “1945년 이전과 크게 변하지 않은 국제질서”라는 인식 속에서 군사력을 통해 국제적인 인정을 쟁취하려는 대한제국기, 식민지시기의 경험을 끌어다왔다. 그리고 이와 같은 주권확립 방식은 모든 방법을 동원하여 국제적인 인정을 받아야한다는 당시의 사회적인 공감 속에서 여타 지식인들이나 야당의원들 또한 적극적인 반대 논리를 생산해내지 못하게끔 하고 있었다.

**주제어:** 대한민국, 한국, 남한, 베트남전쟁, 냉전, 탈식민화, 파병, 주권

