Divergent Perspectives: The U.S.-South Korean Disagreement over the Northern Limit Line in the mid-1970s

Robert Lauler*

Introduction

The Northern Limit Line (NLL) made international news after the sinking of the South Korean corvette, the Ch’ŏnan(Cheonan) and the shelling of Yŏnp’yŏng(Yeonpyeong) Island in 2010. Established sometime after the Korean War,¹ the NLL has been a point of controversy between the two Koreas since the mid-1970s. From late 1973 North Korea has maintained that the NLL was established illegally, and has staged crossings with boats and aircraft intermittently over the years aimed at nullifying the line. South Korea has consistently treated North Korean incursions south of the line as violations of the Armistice Agreement and its territorial waters. Lurking under this inter-Korean NLL dispute, however, has been a little-known disagreement between the U.S. and South Korea over the line.

The NLL first arose as an inter-Korean issue in late 1973, soon after the end of inter-Korean dialogue in August of the same year. In October 1973, North Korean patrol boats made a series of breaches across the NLL, marking the first serious rise in tensions between the two Koreas follow-

* International Team Coordinator, Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights
ing the end of inter-Korean dialogue. Despite the serious nature of these breaches, however, the U.S. and South Korea failed to respond in a uniform manner. According to declassified American documents from the time, U.S. policymakers were wary of the NLL’s legal status under international law, and subsequently worked to prevent American interests from becoming involved in the dispute. South Korean officials, however, believed that the line delineated the border between North and South Korea’s “territorial waters” and actively moved to defend the line’s legality under international law.

There has been no research focused solely on the NLL disagreement between the U.S. and South Korea. Much of the research on the NLL issue has regarded the U.S.-South Korean disagreement as a footnote, and only recently has this research begun to make use of U.S. documents. NarushigeMichishita has shown that North Korea was successful in inciting disagreement between the U.S. and South Korea over the NLL, and Hong Sŏngnyul’s (Seongnyul) research briefly mentions U.S. attempts in late 1973 to minimize its involvement in the NLL issue over South Korean objections.³ This paper intends to use recently declassified U.S. government documents⁴ to expand the discussion on this U.S.-South Korean disagreement by examining it in the context of trends in the relationship during the late 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, this paper aims to find answers to the following questions: Why did the U.S. and South Korea disagree over the NLL? What implications does this have for future U.S. and
South Korean responses to incidents in the region?

The paper is organized as follows. After conducting an overview of the state of U.S.-South Korean relations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the paper will briefly explore the situation leading up to regional conflict around the NLL. This will be followed by an analysis of the U.S.-South Korean disagreement and U.S. responses to the issue using declassified American documents from the period. The conclusion will summarize the findings of this paper and mention any implications this research may have on the current situation.

U.S.-South Korean Relations:
The Late 1960s to the Early 1970s

On the morning of January 21, 1968, a group of 31 North Korean commandos made a failed attempt to assassinate South Korean President Park Chung Hee (PakChŏnghŭi), an incident dubbed the “Blue House Raid.” Two days later, a U.S. reconnaissance boat on patrol off the coast of North Korea, the U.S.S. Pueblo, was taken into custody by the North Korean military, which claimed that the boat had infringed on its “territorial waters.” Despite the serious nature of these two provocations, however, the U.S. and South Korea displayed very different responses to the crises.

The Johnson administration took a measured approach to both the Blue House Raid and the Pueblo Incident. This decision was influenced strongly by the ongoing war in Vietnam, which had become a focal point of U.S. policy in Asia at the time. American officials believed that an outbreak of hostilities would negatively affect fighting in Vietnam by diverting resources from that war to a potential one in Korea. South Korean leaders, on the other hand, showed a more hardline response to the acts of provocation by North Korea. They argued that the threat of attack from North Korea was as high as ever and even likened the drastic rise in North-South clashes along the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) as a possible
harbinger of an invasion. American analysts, however, concluded that the risk of a North Korean frontal attack was much lower than it had been in 1950 and that South Korea was using the threat of a North Korean attack for political means.

The 1968 crisis put on clear display the divergence in perspectives the two allies had toward events on the Korean Peninsula. In a critical period of the Vietnam War, the U.S. feared entrapment in another war in Asia. Moreover, U.S. policymakers did not view the overall threat from North Korea as very serious. On the other hand, South Korean leaders called for a more hardline response to North Korean provocations, while warning that North Korea was preparing to mount an invasion. This divergence in perspectives would continue well into the 1970s as immense changes took place in U.S.-South Korean relations and international politics.

The entrance of the Nixon administration after the 1968 election led to one of the most conflicted periods in the history of U.S.-South Korean relations. In mid-1969 Nixon announced the “Nixon Doctrine,” a strategy to drawdown U.S. involvement in Asia by having allies in the region take more responsibility for their own defense. This was followed by Nixon’s decision to withdraw 20,000 troops from South Korea. The withdrawal of these troops caused great consternation among South Korean leaders. Park himself wrote a personal letter to Nixon in April 1970 asking for him to reconsider the withdrawal of U.S. troops, but to no avail. The stationing of American troops on the peninsula was a symbol of U.S. intent to defend the country, and Park warned in his April 1970 letter to Nixon that the withdrawal of the troops could display weakness and prompt North Korea to invade.

However, American policymakers continued to believe that the South Koreans were exaggerating the threat for domestic political purposes. Furthermore, as tensions in the region began to subside between the major powers American policymakers increasingly believed that neither the Soviet Union nor China would actively support a North Korean invasion. This belief was underpinned by cooling tensions between the major powers on both sides of the Cold War in East Asia. The Nixon admini-
istration had begun moving toward improving relations with China in 1969. American officials had simultaneously begun suggestions to South Korea to initiate dialogue with North Korea. American policymakers believed that inter-Korean talks would lower tensions on the peninsula and subsequently create an atmosphere where Sino-American negotiations could move forward smoothly.\textsuperscript{14}

However, South Korean leaders were much more cautious in their assessment of the changing international environment and the dissolution of Cold War barriers. Park Chung Hee personally viewed détente as a temporary, passing phenomenon. His sentiment was well-displayed in his remark that small countries like South Korea were at risk of being “sacrificed” during nascent Sino-American negotiations.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, the Park government held the belief that North Korea was continuing its plans to “communize” the South by force, and this was underlined by a remark by South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Tongjo(Dongjo) that the Korean Peninsula was a “marked exception to détente.”\textsuperscript{16}

Ultimately, a divergence of perspectives towards events on the Korean Peninsula characterized the U.S. and South Korean relationship during this period. American policymakers constructed policy with global and regional interests in mind, while the South Korean leaders’ focus was largely on the Korean Peninsula. This divergence of perspectives caused the two allies to have different responses to both provocations by North Korea and broader regional and global changes during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

**The End of Inter-Korean Dialogue and the Rise of the NLL Issue**

**Short-lived Inter-Korean Dialogue**

Beginning in August 1971 with meetings between the two countries’ respective Red Cross organizations, inter-Korean dialogue lasted for approximately two years. Yet despite a mutual promise enshrined in the July
4, 1972 Joint Communiqué for “peaceful reunification,” the two Koreas were unable to move toward serious negotiations. South Korea insisted on prioritizing humanitarian issues, while North Korea wanted to proceed first with resolving military and political issues. This divergence reflected the two Koreas different motives for engaging in dialogue.¹⁷

Inter-Korean dialogue took a fateful turn when South Korea publicly called for the two Koreas to enter the United Nations simultaneously as separate entities, referred to as the “June 23 Statement.” Having long opposed such a proposal, North Korea reacted angrily and called it an attempt to “perpetuate the division of the Koreans.” Just two months later on August 28, 1973, North Korea unilaterally announced the end of inter-Korean dialogue, using both the June 23 Statement and the recent Kim Dae Jung (Taejung) kidnapping incident as pretext.¹⁸

The “West Sea Incident”

North Korean provocations around the Northern Limit Line (NLL) began soon after this halt in inter-Korean dialogue. North Korea began sending patrol boats across the NLL from October to December 1973 in what South Koreans call the “West Sea Incident.” According to Military Armistice Commission (MAC)¹⁹ records, North Korean patrol boats briefly crossed over the NLL before heading back north a total of 43 times, including six violations of the Northwest Islands’ contiguous waters from November 19 to December 1, 1973.²⁰ A set of five islands sprawled across the West Sea near the North Korean coast, the Northwest Islands (NWI; also called the Five West Sea Islands, or Sŏhae 5-to) were placed under South Korean control during the Armistice Agreement negotiations to end the Korean War.

At the 346th MAC meeting held to discuss these NLL crossings on December 1, 1973, the North Korean side argued that their patrol boats had not committed any Armistice Agreement violations. The justification for this was presented as follows:
…the Armistice Agreement does not mention anything about the boundary or ceasefire sea territory in the West Sea, and the sea to the north of Hwanghae and Kyŏnggi (Gyeonggi) provinces and surrounding the six West Sea islands in the west are under the military control of North Korea. Further, because the interpretation of section 2, clause 13 of the Armistice Agreement states that the provincial boundary of Hwanghae and Kyŏnggi provinces is an extension of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to the west, the sea north of this is within our “contiguous waters.” Thus, your side must immediately halt the infiltration of naval vessels and spy ships into our contiguous waters as demanded by the Armistice Agreement, and any attempts by your ships to travel to the islands of Paengnyŏng (Baengnyeong), Taech'ŏng (Daecheong), Soch'ŏng (Socheong), Yŏnp'yŏng (Yeonpyeong), and U located in our contiguous waters in the West Sea must be preceded by permission from our side.21

In other words, the North Korean side refused to recognize the NLL by arguing that the waters surrounding the Northwest Islands were in fact in North Korean “contiguous waters.” Moreover, North Korea demanded that any South Korean or United Nations (U.N.) ships attempting to enter North Korea’s contiguous waters must first receive permission from North Korean authorities before attempting such passage.22

**U.S.-South Korean Disagreement over the NLL**

Divergent Perspectives towards the NLL

The beginning of North Korean provocations around the NLL saw divergent U.S. and South Korean perceptions of the line come to the fore. A Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report at the time reflected U.S. reservations over the line by observing that the NLL “…has no legal basis in international law… no evidence exists that the North Koreans have ever
formally recognized the NLL...[and] no documentation can be found to indicate that the NLL was established prior to 1960.”23 In contrast, the South Korean government argued that the NLL had in fact been established in the “spirit” of the Armistice Agreement and its principles, and that North Korea’s 20-year silence over the line demonstrated its acquiescence to South Korea’s authority over waters south of the NLL.24 While this latter point was seconded publicly by American officials during MAC meetings, American documents from the time show that in private U.S. officials vigorously opposed the notion that the NLL had anything to do with the Armistice Agreement.

The South Korean position on the NLL was based largely on the line’s strategic and military benefits. The NLL protected South Korean access to the NWI, which are situated in the West Sea. The NWI were an important part of South Korea’s military strategy due to their location close to the North Korean mainland, a position useful for both staving off a potential North Korean attack and conducting intelligence operations in the region. For example, radars situated on far-flung Paengnyŏng Island enabled the South to quickly comprehend military movements in both China and North Korea.25 As such, South Korea’s position on the line was very much based on domestic security concerns and the deterrence role it played. The American position, in contrast, was deeply connected with contemporary events, particularly ongoing talks with China involving the Korean Peninsula.

Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s had been successful in jumpstarting inter-Korean dialogue, but disagreements between the two major powers remained over the future of the Korean Peninsula. China supported North Korea’s demand for a change in the status quo by first replacing the Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty. American officials, for their part, sought to continue the status quo by maintaining the “Armistice Regime.”26

Discussion between the two powers soon focused on the dissolution of two U.N. organizations, the United Nations Commission for Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK) and the United Nations Com-
mand (UNC). These two U.N. organizations symbolized the U.N. presence in South Korea, and China and North Korea saw the ultimate dissolution of these organizations as a propaganda victory and much more. Indeed, North Korea viewed the termination of the UNC, which held overall authority over South Korean troops, as an essential step toward the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from the peninsula. American policymakers had acquiesced to the termination of both organizations as part of their plan to move discussions on Korean unification from the U.N. sphere to the two Koreas. In the context of the wider drawdown in Asia and South Korea occurring at the time, the dissolution of these two organizations was part of an American effort to lower American involvement in what it deemed “internal” Korean issues.

The U.S. soon presented a plan to the Chinese for the dissolution of the UNCURK in late 1973 and the UNC in 1974. A conflict of interest between the Chinese and North Koreans, however, forced the Chinese to persuade a reluctant North Korea to accept the U.S. plan. North Korean leaders believed that the immediate dissolution of the UNC would lead to the exit of U.S. troops and the signing of a peace treaty. In contrast, China was less concerned about the immediate exit of U.S. troops due to fears over Japanese rearmament. With North Korea’s reluctant acceptance, the UNCURK was terminated during a U.N. General Assembly meeting on November 21, 1973.

However, the dissolution of the UNCURK coincided with the beginning of North Korean provocations around the NLL. American policymakers noted that NLL provocations appeared to be due to North Korea’s desire for immediate UNC dissolution; in other words, they believed that North Korea was purposefully raising tensions to pressure the U.S. for faster dissolution of the UNC. As a National Security Council Memorandum in December 3, 1973, observed, “North Korea may now be attempting to act somewhat independently of China by calling attention to the remaining issues where it seeks U.N. and US action.” In fact, this American analysis was given more credence following North Korea’s March 1974 proposal for a U.S.-North Korean peace treaty, which included a
reference to the rise of tensions on the peninsula since the end of inter-Korean dialogue in August 1973. The North Korean’s inclusion of this reference makes it possible to surmise that the North Koreans had intentionally raised tensions on the peninsula to serve as a negotiation tactic with the U.S.33

Regardless of North Korean intentions, American policymakers recognized that UNC involvement in an inter-Korean dispute over the legally ambiguous NLL could potentially damage the organization’s international legitimacy. A November 1973 telegram from Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to the Seoul Embassy American officials stated that the U.S. did “not wish to see UNC used in attempt [sic] to legitimate unilateral boundary claims.”34 Washington was particularly worried about “… plausible charges that US was exceeding its role as UNC in support of ROKG [Republic of Korea Government] fishing or quote operational waters unquote claims” that could be “highly damaging to US/ROK political interests.”35 The State Department further instructed officials in Seoul that “…it is imperative that all concerned avoid US involvement in future actions which appear to violate accepted principles of international law and ensure that ROK forces do not participate in similar actions under UNC.”36 Concern over damage to the legitimacy of the UNC pushed U.S. policymakers to adopt several measures to prevent the organization’s entrapment in the NLL dispute.

“Territorial Waters” and the “Armistice Zone”

The first of these measures was to clearly delineate future UNC involvement in only those incidents that occurred in the “armistice zone,” or the territory defined in the Armistice Agreement as under South Korean/UNC control. The U.S. at the time was adhering to a three nautical-mile limit on territorial waters,37 and American officials set out to define the territorial waters of the NWI as this three nautical mile limit. American UNC officials were instructed “to avoid the conflicting territorial waters claim of the two Koreas” and told to not make “a legal defense of the
In short, UNC officials were to only recognize incidents where a North Korean military vessel had crossed over the territorial waters of the NWI, while incidents involving a simple breach of the NLL were to be ignored. Throughout incidents occurring from 1973 to 1975, the UNC consistently recognized only those incidents that involved the breach of NWI territorial waters.

However, South Korea refused to recognize this distinction and proceeded to call any breach of the NLL a violation of the Armistice Agreement. During incidents occurring in the region in 1974 and 1975, the South Korean government publicly announced that North Korean breaches of the NLL had violated the Armistice Agreement and insisted that South Korean “territorial waters” and even so-called “fishing zones” had been violated. Through its embassy in Seoul, American policymakers privately criticized this South Korean position. A February 1975 cable from Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to the Seoul Embassy pointed out that South Korean positions “… exacerbate above problem [NLL legal status] by erroneous use of term quote territorial waters...USG adheres to 3 mile limit of territorial waters...We do not repeat do not view legitimate functions of either UNC...or USG...as including armed enforcement of ROK fishing claims, especially in areas we regard as international waters beyond the armistice zone.”

Aside from concerns over the NLL, American unease over “territorial” and “fishing” waters were related to growing international support at the time for 12 nautical-mile territorial waters. In February 1974, American policymakers expressed concern over the South Korean government’s custom of moving fishing grounds northward, closer to North Korean territory: “ROK naval vessels would also have to move into area to protect fishermen [and] this could be labeled a provocation by North Korea...In view of growing support worldwide for the twelve-mile limit, many nations would share North's view that this was uncalled for provocation.” American officials were concerned that this condemnation could be directed at the UNC for protecting South Korean “fishing claims.”
Inter-Korean Dialogue

The second measure American policymakers took to minimize UNC involvement was to encourage inter-Korean dialogue to resolve the NLL dispute. This measure was generally in line with the overall shift in American Korea policy toward “non-intervention” in Korean internal issues by the late 1960s and 1970s, as opposed to heavy American intervention in South Korean politics up until the mid-1960s. The Nixon administration in particular had moved to further detach the U.S. from what it deemed domestic Korean issues, exemplified by the American “hands-off” policy toward President Park’s successful tweaking of the constitution to allow himself a third term in 1969, and by the muted American response to the establishment of the Yusin Constitution by the Park regime in late 1972. In accordance with the overall drawdown of the U.S. military presence in South Korea through the Nixon Doctrine, American officials placed emphasis on inter-Korean dialogue to avoid U.S. entrapment in “internal issues,” and the NLL dispute clearly fell under such criteria.

Early on in the NLL dispute, American officials pushed for inter-Korean dialogue to bring about a resolution. In December 1973, the U.S. suggested that South Korea use the North-South “hotline” to resolve the issue through dialogue with the North. The U.S. also appears to have encouraged China to place pressure on North Korea to resolve the dispute through dialogue with the South. Discussions between North and South Korea did take place, but yielded no results. During incidents occurring in 1974 and 1975, American officials continued to push for an inter-Korean resolution to the problem, but South Korea stonewalled these U.S. attempts. South Korea was adamant that North Korean breaches of the NLL were violations of the Armistice Agreement, and argued that the UNC needed to be involved in censuring breaches of the line. As noted earlier, the South Korean position on the NLL was that the line had been established “in the spirit” of the Armistice Agreement, and thus any violations south of the line had to be dealt with by the MAC.
Defending the Northwest Islands

The third measure taken by U.S. officials was to ensure the UNC would not become entrapped in military hostilities in the region. North Korean provocations in late 1973 had exposed the poor state of South Korean defenses on the NWI, and the country’s leaders soon began efforts to fortify regional defenses. American policymakers were aware of the dangers of a limited North Korean strike on the NWI that could be “…controlled by the North, would not preclude continued Soviet and Chinese assistance, would provoke fear in the U.S. of another Korean war, would involve the U.S. and the ROK in debate and argument over the proper response, and in the end could cause changes in U.S. policy favorable to North Korea.” Cognizant of the vulnerabilities surrounding the NWI, U.S. policymakers generally supported South Korean fortification efforts, even providing cruisers and other weapons to help in the islands’ defense.

Moreover, American attitudes toward the North Korean threat began to change by 1975 with the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War. American officials were highly aware of the negative effects of the fall of Vietnam on its allies in Asia, particularly South Korea. A visit by North Korean leader Kim Il Sung (KimIl-sông) to Beijing in April right before the fall of Saigon and reports he had made belligerent statements toward South Korea during his visit there touched off a “Red Scare” in the South. As a result, the Park government stepped up its calls for a reconfirmation of the U.S. security commitment to the country. The Ford administration’s own analysis of the situation concluded that there was an increased chance that North Korea could stage a “solo invasion” of South Korea without Chinese or Soviet support. This led to an increase in the amount of military aid and cooperation to South Korea, even over domestic protests aimed at the Park government’s human rights record. Ultimately, this was significant change in American threat perception toward North Korea from the previous Nixon administration.

While the crisis in Indochina led to an overall strengthening of the
U.S.-South Korean alliance, fears over becoming entrapped in a wider war nonetheless prevented the U.S. from promising a direct commitment to the defense of territory it deemed outside of the Armistice Agreement. By early 1975, American officials had clearly stated that U.S. aircraft would not conduct missions outside the three nautical-mile territorial waters of the NWI. Moreover, despite calls by South Korean leaders for an “automatic response” by the U.S. in the event of hostilities, the U.S. argued that a “five-day period” would be necessary to conduct consultations before deciding on a course of action.

American ambiguity over its commitment to the defense of the islands was partly shaped by concerns over possible South Korean responses to a limited North Korean attack in the region. American policymakers specifically worried about the impact of South Korean armed reprisals across the DMZ that could “create a much greater stir than the original attack by the North Koreans against the NWI.” American fears that a South Korean overreaction could spark a wider war were in fact nothing new; American military officials had purposefully limited South Korea’s air force capabilities to prevent the country from staging attacks on North Korea that could ignite a second Korean War. Similarly, this fear had led American officials to forcibly restrain Park Chung Hee from conducting armed retribution against North Korea following the “Blue House Raid.” The U.S. stance toward the defense of the NWI ultimately followed a precedent of preventing unnecessary American entrapment in hostilities on the Korean Peninsula.

**Conclusion**

Broadly speaking, the NLL issue provides an excellent example of how divergent perceptions in the two country’s policymaking led to disagreement between the U.S. and South Korea. The 1977 Fraser Report describes the nature of the two country’s relationship from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s as follows:
Security issues were central to the U.S.-South Korean relationship from 1965 to 1978. However, in the late 1960s while the U.S. was completely immersed in the Vietnam War, South Korea’s main focus was North Korea. The U.S. tried to understand events on the Korean Peninsula through a global context, while South Korea viewed the same events through the standpoint of rivalry with North Korea. These two different perceptions frequently created differences in opinion between the two countries (concerning issues occurring in the 1960s and 1970s), and occasionally resulted in conflict. The Park government believed that American responses to North Korean actions were inappropriate. On the other hand, South Korea had frequently exaggerated the threat from North Korea to American officials for political purposes..."61

American policymakers, heading a global hegemonic power, have viewed events on the Korean Peninsula through a global perspective. This has contrasted with South Korean leaders, who have tended to view the same events through a more limited vantage point, namely their confrontation with North Korea. The NLL disagreement is a classic example of these divergent perceptions. The U.S. was concerned about the international impact of its involvement in the NLL disagreement, and American officials took a number of measures to reduce potential political and military entrapment in the issue. This included pushing for an inter-Korean solution and clearly delineating its involvement militarily in the region. The South Korean government, however, largely viewed the NLL issue from the viewpoint of security in its rivalry with North Korea. South Korean leaders appeared to have had little concern about the larger questions of international law that worried American officials, and signaled their intent of maintaining the line by calling for it to be “defended to the death.”

The disagreement over the NLL between the U.S. and South Korean still continues to this day, but has barely become an issue during recent incidents in the region.62 While the drastic reduction of North Korean
provocations in the region overall has contributed to this, a major factor has undoubtedly been the de facto dissolution of the MAC. After the pullout of North Korea and China from the MAC in the early 1990s, the MAC has become essentially defunct. In the past, the U.S. and South Korean disagreement toward the NLL was publicized through different responses to North Korean provocations inside and outside the MAC. However, the dissolution of this organization has lowered U.S. involvement in responding to North Korean provocations and has thus reduced the chances for the two countries to publicly disagree on the issue.

Consequently, the U.S. should be concerned with a potential overreaction by the South Korean military in response to North Korean provocations in the region. Since the incidents in 2010, South Korea has initiated a military build-up in the Northwest Islands, much like the one undertaken during the mid-1970s. Just as it was then, American leaders should be concerned about the potential for a South Korean overreaction toward North Korean provocations. While North Korean provocations must be dealt with in a resolute manner, an overreaction by South Korean forces could embroil the Korean Peninsula into a serious conflict. This could then cause the involvement of U.S. forces, a scenario which American leaders have historically wanted to prevent.

This paper has demonstrated that the basis of the U.S. and South Korean disagreement over the NLL was divergent perceptions toward events on the Korean Peninsula. However, this paper was limited in its scope due to the unavailability of U.S. documents concerning the NLL into the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Moreover, very few South Korean documents are available and this prevented a deeper examination of South Korean decision-making toward the NLL in the 1970s. The release of more documents in the future will aid in further tracing the perspectives of the two countries toward the line more systematically.
Notes:

1 There is controversy surrounding exactly when the NLL was established. The South Korean government argues that the NLL was established right after the Korean War in 1953, while a 1974 CIA document states that there is no evidence that the NLL was established after 1960. See, “The West Coast Islands,” January 1, 1974, Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, The Origins of the Northern Limit Line Dispute: New Evidence from Romanian and American Archives, North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP) e-dossier, 16. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-origins-the-northern-limit-line-dispute (accessed April 15, 2012)


4 These documents include diplomatic cables obtained by the author from the National Archives website, and other documents recently released by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholar’s North Korea International Documentation Project. Please see “The Origins of the Northern Limit Line Dispute” NKIDP e-dossier series.

5 Hong, 47-48.

6 For more detailed information on the circumstances surrounding the capture of the USS Pueblo, please see Michael Lerner, The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

7 For a detailed treatment of the U.S.-South Korean rift during the 1968 security crisis, please see the following: Park TaeGyun (Pak T’aegyun), Ubangkwachekuk: Han MI kwan’gyeũitusinhwa (Ally and Empire: The Two Myths of US-ROK Relations) (Seoul: Ch'angchakkwa Pip'yŏngsa, 2007); Ryu Kilchae, “1960nyŏntae mal PukhanũitopalkwaHan MI kwan’gyeũikyunyŏl” (North Korean Provoca-

8 Park TaeGyun, “Beyond the Myth: Reassessing the Security Crisis on the Korean Peninsula during the Mid-1960s,” Pacific Affairs, 82, 1 (2009): 99. In particular, this rise in North-South clashes displayed similarities with the clashes occurring before the outbreak of the Korean War in 1949. In 1968, KCIA Director Kim Hyŏnguk reported that an outbreak of total war could occur on the Korean Peninsula as a result of the rise in clashes.

9 Park, Ubang kwa chekuk, 290-291. Despite the marked rise in North Korean provocations, U.S. documents from the period concluded that there was a low threat of an attack from North Korea. American officials believed that it would be far more difficult for North Korea to pull off a major surprise assault like it had in the 1950 because of greater surveillance of North Korean military movements.

10 The Nixon Doctrine, or Guam doctrine, refers to a set of remarks made by President Nixon in a Q&A session with newsmen during a presidential stopover in Guam. The text of President Nixon’s entire remarks can be found here: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2140#axzz1qnQ2JPu5, accessed April 1, 2012.

11 Park, Ubang kwa chekuk, 335. The Nixon administration had originally aimed to start official troop withdrawals at a sooner date, but the EC-121 shoot-down incident caused American policymakers to delay planned withdrawals. Nonetheless, unofficial troop withdrawals began in mid-1969.


13 Sin Ukhu, “Kihoeesŏkyoch'aksangt'aero: tet'angt'ŭsiki Han Mi kwan’gyewa Hanbandoůiikukchechŏngch'I” (From Opportunity to Stalemate: U.S.-South Korean Relations during Détente and International Politics of the Korean Peninsula), Hankukchŏngch'i oegyosanongch'ong 26 (2005): 277.

14 Hong, The Hysteria of Division, 156.

16 Ibid., 110.

17 North Korean leaders desired a change in the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. They had tried unsuccessfully in the late 1960s to stir rebellion in South Korea through armed provocations, and this failure led to a change in tactics as Cold War tensions cooled in East Asia in the early 1970s. On the other hand, South Korean leaders aim for dialogue was less on changing the status quo than providing a “breathing space” for developing the South’s military and economic growth. The Park government was further immensely suspicious of North Korea’s “peace offensive,” which seemed disingenuous coming right after severe inter-Korean tensions in the late 1960s.

18 Hong, *The Hysteria of Division*, 345. The June 23 Statement incensed North Korea enough for it to release a five-point plan for unification the same day, in direct violation of an inter-Korean agreement to not present such unilateral unification plans. However, the June 23 Statement had also violated the spirit of inter-Korean dialogue in that it had been unilateral without any negotiations with North Korea. The North Koreans had consistently argued against simultaneous entrance into the U.N., saying that it would “perpetuate division” of the two Koreas.

20 The Military Armistice Commission was established as part of the Armistice Regime put in place after the Korean War to prevent a further outbreak of hostilities. The MAC was convened by either signatory of the Armistice Agreement when an incident or provocation took place on the Korean Peninsula.


22 O Ilhwan, “PukhanŭPukbanghan’gyesŏn (NLL) muryŏkhwasidowakŭtaeŭngch’aek” (How South Korea Should Respond to North Korea’s Attempts to Neutralize the NLL), *WŏlkanAt’aechiyŏkTonghyang* 146 (2004): 14. Researcher’s translation.

23 North Korea had made a behind-closed-doors decision in 1955 to adopt a 12 nautical mile territorial waters scheme that would technically place North Korean territorial waters in conflict with the NLL. However, there was no record of the country ever making public its displeasure toward the line until late 1973.


25 SŏYusŏk，“Pukhanŭikunsachŏch'aekmich' kunsachŏnryakpyŏnhwawaSŏhaekin changsat'aechŏnman (Changes in North Korean Military Policy and Strategy and Outlooks for Tensions in the West Sea),” Institute of North Korean Studies Policy Paper, (Seoul: T'ongilpu, 2010), 47. http://www.prism.go.kr/homepage/researchCommon/retrieveResearchDetailPopup.do?research_id=1250000-201000025 (Accessed April 18, 2012). South Korea continues to argue that according to the “doctrine of acquiescence” North Korea has lost all rights to contest South Korean authority over the region south of the NLL. Seoul argues that North Korea failed to express opposition to the NLL for over 20 years and that this“silence shows consent.”


27 The “Armistice Regime” here generally refers to all those organizations and procedures established by the Armistice Agreement signed at the end of the Korean War to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula.

28 The United Nations Commission for Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK) was established during the Korean War and made annual reports to the U.N. General Assembly on events concerning the Korean Peninsula. The United Nations Command (UNC) was established by the U.N. Security Council following the outbreak of the Korean War. The UNC commander held responsibility for the management of the Armistice in South Korea, and until recently held both war-time and peace-time authority over South Korean troops. Peace-time authority was returned to South Korea in 1994.

29 Hong, The Hysteria of Division, 354-355.

30 Ibid, 345.


32 Ibid, 356. The final resolution did not mention the dissolution of the UNC or the withdrawal of USFK troops.


34 Michishita, “Calculated Adventurism,” 380-382.Scholars have introduced
other possible motives for why North Korea began provocations at this time period. Many scholars have pointed out that North Korean naval capabilities had improved drastically by late 1973, particularly in the NWI region. For example, the Korean People’s Navy conducted its first amphibious combat exercises in the fall of 1973, and the period coincides with the general buildup of North Korean military capabilities. This in turn may have aided hardliners advocating a more aggressive policy toward South Korea following the failure of inter-Korean dialogue. Inter-Korean dialogue failed to resolve North Korea’s desired goals, notably the exit of U.S. troops and concluding a peace treaty to replace the Armistice Agreement. The hardliners, perhaps led by Kim Jong Il, may have pushed for a more confrontational policy toward South Korea. Please see Terence Roehrig, “Korean Dispute over the Northern Limit Line: Security, Economics, or International Law?,” *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* 2008, #3, 52-53. Michishita, “Calculated Adventurism,” 366.


37 Ibid.

38 Michishita, “Calculated Adventurism,” 358. At the time, the US officially only supported three-mile territorial waters claims. However, international support for three mile territorial waters claims had diminished rapidly by the start of the 1970s. In fact, the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea convened in December of 1973, right as North Korea began making provocations in the NWI region. Against U.S. opposition, the conference ultimately adopted the 12 nautical mile territorial waters argued for by a host of smaller nations.


40 Michishita, “Calculated Adventurism,” 343, 349.

41 Ibid., 349-350.

42 “West Coast Agent Boat Incident, July 23, 1974,” Cable from American Em-


45 The Yusin Constitution was proclaimed during October 1972 and effectively paved the way for Park to extend absolute power over the country.

46 Park, Ubang kwa chekuk, 340.

47 This hotline was established after the July 4, 1972 Joint Communiqué to enable the two Koreas to quickly contact each other in the event of armed hostilities or serious political changes.


50 These discussions took place during North-South Coordination Committee meetings, but “negotiations” generally consisted of throwing insults back and forth at each other. For example, please see “Discussions of Islands Problem in Coordinating Committee Meeting,” Cable from American Embassy Seoul to Secretary of State, February 12, 1974, Record Group 59, Central Foreign Policy Files 1973-1976, National Archives at College Park.

51 Hong, The Hysteria of Division, 360.

52 Michishita, “Calculated Adventurism,” 386-388. According to a U.S. document, as of December 1973 there were 1,000 South Korean soldiers stationed on two of the islands. Please see “Proposed WSAG Meeting on Korean Situation,” Memorandum for General Scowcroft from John A. Froebe,” JR (NSC),

53 “Possible North Korean Initiatives During 1976,” April 22, 1976, Memorandum from Jay Taylor of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Box 10, Korea (15).


55 Andrew Gawthorpe J., “The Ford Administration and Security Policy in the Pacific after the Fall of Saigon,” The Historical Journal 52, #3 (2009): 700. For example, during the Mayaguez crisis in May 1975 Ford administration officials called for a strong response to help demonstrate that the U.S. was still a powerful force in the region to allies, particularly South Korea. Henry Kissinger in particular argued for a strong response for the South Koreans that would help to relieve their security fears.


58 Michishita, “Calculated Adventurism,” 349.


61 The Fraser Report was produced during a period of high-profile congressional criticism aimed at South Korea’s human rights record following the proclamation of the Yusin Constitution, and revelations that the South Korean government had attempted to influence U.S. congressional members’ votes on withdrawing USFK troops, also known as the “Korea-gate” scandal.


63 There have been exceptions. The divergence in US and South Korean perspectives toward the NLL issue was confirmed during inter-Korean clashes in 1999. During the 1999 crisis, the U.S. State Department received fire from the South Korean government when it reported that clashes between the two Korean navies had occurred in “international waters.” The U.S. has since refrained from using the term. Furthermore, in both clashes in 1999 and 2002 the U.S. has called the West Sea between the two Koreas a “maritime area of dispute,” indicating that it does not fully recognize South Korea’s authority over the area. Please see Roehrig, "Korean Dispute over the Northern Limit Line: Security, Economics, or International Law?". Thank you to my anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

Divergent Perspectives: The U.S.–South Korean Disagreement over the Northern Limit Line in the mid-1970s

Lurking under the inter-Korean dispute over the Northern Limit Line (NLL) is a little-known U.S.-South Korean disagreement regarding the line. In this paper I examine the roots of this disagreement during the mid-1970s using U.S. government documents from the period. I argue that the basis of the NLL disagreement lies in the two allies’ divergent perceptions toward security issues. In contrast to the more global lens U.S. policymakers have adopted in viewing events on the Korean Peninsula, South Korean leaders have traditionally viewed these events through a narrower, Korean Peninsula-centered perspective. This divergence in perceptions was the underlying factor in the U.S.-South Korean disagreement over the NLL and ultimately resulted in the allies’ failure to respond to North Korean provocations in the region in a uniform manner.

Keywords: Northern Limit Line, U.S. and South Korean Relations, North Korean Provocations, West Sea Islands issue
엇갈리는 관점들: 1970년 중반 미국과 남한의 북방한계선에 관한 분쟁

Robert Lauler(북한민주화네트워크 국제팀장)

남북간 북방한계선 (NLL)을 둔 갈등 외에도 한미간 NLL을 둔 입장차이가 있어 왔다. 본 논문에서는 기밀해제된 미국 정부의 문서들을 이용하여 1970년대 초반에 시작된 한미간 NLL 입장차이의 뿌리를 살펴보았다. 특히 이러한 한미간 입장차이는 늘 존재하던, 한반도의 안보 문제에서도 나타나는 한미간 입장차이 및 갈등과 무관 하지 않는 점을 주시한다. 즉 미국 정책결정자들은 세계적인 시각을 갖고 한반도 내 사건을 보는 한편, 한국 정책결정자들은 한반도에 한정된 시각으로 같은 사건을 보곤 한다는 것이다. 이러한 시각차이는 한미간 NLL 입장차이의 근본적인 요인이 되었으며 결국 NLL 근방에서 발생된 북한의 도발에 다르게 대응하는 상황이 벌어 지게 하였다.

주제어: 북방한계선, 한미관계, 북한의 도발, 서해5도문제