

# The Impact of the Korean War on the Korean Military

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## Introduction

The South Korean military was a victim as well as a beneficiary of the Korean War. By the time of the outbreak of the war, the military was a fledgling force, dreadfully inferior in equipment and training. The military was almost crushed within a few days of the war. Ironically, the war transformed and strengthened the military; the infantile and immature Korean military became trained, equipped, and combat-experienced. Quantitatively, the military grew to be one of the largest militaries in the world; qualitatively, the third-rate "police reserve" became a modern professional military. Within the society, the military became the most Westernized and influential institution. In other words, the Korean War was a painful catalyst for the development of a strong Korean military.

Despite the profound changes and development of the Korean military during the war, the impact of the war on the military has not been carefully examined. As Chae-Jin Lee wrote, "in South Korea a number of myths and taboos about the war have long been perpetuated, which in turn tend to prevent an objective, rational assessment of the war's impact." The Korean War is the most serious national tragedy in Korean history. Koreans are reluctant to refocus on this-horrible war. Therefore, limited attention has been paid to the impact of the war. Moreover, probably because of traditional Korean denigration of the military and the fact that military elite dominated Korean politics for three decades since 1961, study of the military has tended to be neglected.

This paper is a modest initial attempt at describing the general impact of the Korean War on the Korean military. For this purpose the author reviewed materials on the Korean War and tried to understand what happened in the Korean military before and during the war: how

the Korean military was established and how it was transformed. Thus, the first section describes the state of the Korean military before the war—the process of establishment and the quality of the military, especially its weakness. The second section examines what happened to the military during the war. The third section attempts to conceptualize some salient effects of the war on the military, and the final section discusses the implications of a strong military for Korea, particularly civil-military relations.

### **Prewar State of the Military**

The Korean military is a completely new institution. An enduring military tradition was lacking in Korea. During the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), the military was very weak under the influence of Confucianism, which stresses civilian supremacy over the military. When the traditional Korean military was formally disbanded in 1907, it consisted of only 6,000 men. Colonial Korea had no military of its own. During World War II, Japan drafted Korean youths. There were some Korean independence fighters in Manchuria and China, but no organized Korean military. When Korea was liberated from Japan in 1945, there was no Korean military.<sup>2</sup>

The embryo of a modern Korean military was formed during the American military occupation. After liberation, South Korea was beset by post-colonial restlessness and disturbances, and the 25,000-man police force was not able to handle the social unrest without assistance from U.S. troops. To supplement the police, the American Military Government in Korea established a Korean Constabulary as a "police reserve."

However, the United States was reluctant to build a modern and large military in South Korea. The United States was preoccupied with Europe. It had no will and military capability to engage in a war on the Asian continent. Thus, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff declared that Korea was not of strategic importance, and should war break out with Russia, Korea might become a liability. General MacArthur also believed that the U.S. "did not have the capability to train and equip Korean troops ... to cope with a full-scale invasion. If a serious threat developed, the United States would have to give up active military support of the ROK forces."<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, U.S. military assistance to South Korea was firmly based on the policy that the South Korean military was basically an internal security force. Specifically, Washington aimed to provide equipment only to enable South Koreans to: 1) preserve internal security, 2) prevent border raids and incursions from the North, and 3) as a by-product, deter armed attack from North Korea.<sup>4</sup> The United States thus

equipped and trained the Constabulary for internal defense and security and rigorously refused to permit its aid to fund the modern armament of the Constabulary.

As the U.S. had no concrete policy for the future of South Korea, the establishment of the Constabulary was not carried out in a planned manner. The inception of the Constabulary had been a "grab-bag affair," in which former officers of the Japanese, Japanese-Manchurian, Chinese Nationalist, Korean Liberation Army, former Japanese-trained police and constabulary personnel, and a hodgepodge of newcomers all came together without a mutually acceptable purpose and with a minimum of cohesion. This heterogeneous, opportunistic origin resulted in serious factionalism and disunity. There were distrust and hatred between the factions of former Japanese officers and others. Officers tended to look askance at each other, having recently served on opposing sides; for example, many members of the former Korean Liberation Army rejected the idea of participating in the new Korean armed forces with former Japanese officers. The Americans favored the more trained ex-Japanese officers over the less standardized fighters from the Liberation Army. Consequently, the dominance of the ex-Japanese officers in the military diminished its credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the Korean people.

Due to the lack of adequate training and education, the factions preserved many traditional characteristics. Confucian values and military ideals combined to produce a strong tendency toward the recruitment of officers based on seniority. Each faction had its own top leader, and decisions were made by group consultation.<sup>5</sup> In short, the Constabulary failed to generate an overall *esprit de corps*, code of discipline, or pattern of defense goals.

During the recruitment, the Korean adviser to the Director of National Defense of the U.S. Military Government, Ung-joon Lee, insisted that all new recruits had to undergo qualification and identity checks in order to prevent subversion from leftists. Lee requested that new recruits should submit to an ideological examination.<sup>6</sup> The Americans rejected the idea and directed that men should be selected from all groups, including communists, on the principle that the military must not be "political." Furthermore, no American officer concerned had any concept of the complex background of the men and groups with which he was dealing. "Recruitment standards remained low, and reasonably healthy applicants had little difficulty in enlisting."<sup>7</sup> Before long, military barracks became places for ideological feuding, and terrorism between the leftists and rightists became commonplace. Communists thus infiltrated almost all units of the military.

The First Regiment of the Constabulary was established on the outskirts of Seoul in January 1946. Seven additional regiments were organized in March: one regiment in each province. The size of each regiment was small, not exceeding a battalion or a company. The Constabulary took form so slowly that a year later it numbered only 5,000 men, with 143 officers. By April 1947, however, it had doubled in strength, and in July of that year it had reached 15,000. In March 1948, just two months after North Korea announced the establishment of the North Korean People's Army, the U.S. announced support for a 50,000-man South Korean Constabulary.<sup>8</sup> Then, American efforts to strengthen the Constabulary took place in a hurry: regiment headquarters were activated, technical services started, equipment increased, and American military advisers increased. The Constabulary became South Korea's military when the Republic of Korea was established in August 1948 and grew so rapidly in the next few months that by January 1949, it numbered more than 65,000 men.

After his inauguration, President Syngman Rhee emphasized the buildup of the armed forces. His accomplishment was, however, greatly limited by the lack of resources, the urgent welfare needs of the populace, and the refusal of the United States to support or to allow the development of a Korean military that might threaten North Korea. Even so, the number of men in service was promptly increased. The Republic, striving for the rapid expansion of the army in the face of growing communist aggression, established six new regiments and two brigades during the first five months after the ROK Army was created. By May 12, 1949, each brigade in existence was transformed into a division.

The United States had only authorized the transfer of infantry weapons for 50,000 troops with standard infantry-type weapons, including M1 rifles and 60-mm and 81-mm mortars, and, therefore, about half of the ROK armed forces had to be issued ex-Japanese army weapons.<sup>9</sup> Fearful that the South might attack the North and embroil the U.S. in a war, the United States restricted the armament of the new army, depriving its divisions of adequate antitank and anti-aircraft weapons and heavy artillery, and denying it any armor at all. After the withdrawal of the U.S. forces in June 1949, the ROK army also lost its best source of supplies. There remained a group of 482 U.S. Army officers and enlisted men working as military advisers for the ROK military.

From early 1949, training, for the first time, began to emerge from the primitive and makeshift. The training was limited to the use of small arms, basic drills, and methods of internal security. Lack of officer and noncommissioned officer training was one of the most

serious problems of the military. Japanese-trained senior officers were unwilling to abandon their Japanese-taught stereotyped procedures and attitudes. They refused to master the staff work essential for the conduct of sustained operations. Such drudgery they considered far beneath their dignity. The idea of coordinating the maneuvers of more than a battalion at a time was beyond their comprehension. Staff training was virtually nonexistent. Junior officers in headquarters at all levels were not much more than yes-men with little idea of their roles. Senior commanders, most of them trained by the Japanese, seemed to have little notion of how to train their staffs.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of 1949, 13 military schools were providing specialist instruction in such areas as artillery, field engineering, signals, quartermaster and ordnance, supply and transportation. This represented the beginning of in-depth training which would give an army the flexibility needed to fight a serious war. Officer training was started; by June 1950, just three weeks before the invasion, the first class of Korea's two-year Military Academy started training. Despite these efforts, the capability of the ROK Army was highly questionable; the army had not advanced in its training beyond platoon- and a few battalion-level exercises. In early 1950 the U.S. Military Advisory Group observed that "only a third of the army's battalions could be considered battle-worthy."

Proliferating factional rivalries, intensifying ideological confusion, and deteriorating social and political unrest all exerted a baneful influence on the morale and purposes of the military. Many of the officers and men in the military did not understand why Korea was divided and who was their enemy. For some, former Japanese officers and collaborators were regarded as enemy. Due to the American principle of "neutral" recruitment, a large number of communists could infiltrate the military. Thus, the loyalty of some of the soldiers was questionable. Quite unsurprisingly, less than 10 weeks after the establishment of the Republic, the 14<sup>th</sup> Regiment, which was ordered to suppress the communist insurrection in Cheju Island, rebelled. The mutiny was plotted by some communist-sympathizing members of the regiment. The 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, dispatched to regain control, also joined the rebellion. But the rebels went into hiding in remote mountain areas and launched guerrilla warfare with manpower and supplies directly supported by North Korea. There were further mutinies in the military, including two by the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment in Taegu in November and December 1948.<sup>12</sup> In addition, there were mass defections. In May 1949 two battalions of the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel into North Korea and surrendered. During May 1948 to May 1949 three naval vessels and their crews defected to the North.

Prompted by military rebellions and multiple defections, the military undertook a massive purge until the outbreak of the Korean War, liquidating some 4,750 officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Affected by this purge was more than 10 percent of the entire army officer corps and NCOs. It was estimated that more than one third of the original officer-NCO corps was executed, jailed, or discharged.<sup>13</sup>

In short, the establishment of the Korean armed forces suffered from some deficiencies—lack of political commitment and consequent limit of logistical support, low recruitment standards, rapid expansion, and poor equipment and training.

Just before the outbreak of the Korean War the ROK Army consisted of eight divisions, but it was very weak—with approximately 95,000 men and equipment for only 50,000 men, much of it unserviceable or lacking spare parts, and grievously deficient in heavy equipment. The ROK Army supply of artillery and motor ammunition on hand was small and would be exhausted by a few days of combat. An estimated 15 percent of the weapons and 35 percent of the vehicles were unserviceable. Furthermore, due to the subversive and guerrilla activities of the communists, the ROK Army divided its forces, half along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and half in reserve, stationed in major cities. By the end of 1949 the ROK Army had to mount an average of three anti-guerrilla operations a day. In June 1950 the ROK had a Navy of 6,000 men with 30 medium and small vessels and an Air Force of about 2,000 men with only 22 training aircraft.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Reorganization, Expansion, and Training During the War**

On June 25, 1950, the North Korean Army crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel into the South with the objective of conquering all of South Korea. The North Koreans came not as guerrillas but in a frontal assault. Their 10 divisions were spread across the peninsula from east to west in a broad front using tanks, artillery, and airplanes—exactly how the Russians might have attacked the Germans. The ROK forces were no match for the invading enemy.

The ROK military was long on courage but short on everything else needed to fight a war successfully. It was fought by South Korean troops without warplanes or tanks and cannons, armed at best with 2.36' bazookas so light that their projectiles bounced off the sides of advancing tanks. Many ROK units stood and fought courageously against overwhelming odds. With no antitank weapons, the ROK infantry adopted suicidal tactics in their efforts to stop the rampaging T-34 tanks that threatened to overrun them, climbing onto their turrets with explosive charges or hurling themselves as human bombs onto the tanks to detonate satchels of explosives tied to their bodies.<sup>15</sup> The war

streets of Taegu and Pusan and were dispatched to the battlefield. They were grossly under-trained: they received only 10 days of quick instruction. None of them had fired more than 10 rounds of ammunition during their individual weapons training. The ROK soldiers in the first part of the war did not have the technical knowledge to use much of the communication equipment, the artillery, the tanks, and other weapons the American divisions possessed. Nor did they have as much transport as the American division. Usually every ROK division had an American battalion of 105-mm howitzers attached to it for fire support, and some had tank battalions attached to them.

Somehow, the ROK Army could maintain its strength at 85,000 men in August. In order to reverse the tide of war, however, the ROK forces had to be strengthened. A plan to create an additional five divisions was implemented, activating one division a month starting in September 1950. Although the plan made slow progress, a year later the army had grown to 10 divisions filled by new recruits.<sup>21</sup>

The U.N. troops experienced extreme difficulties in the campaigns in the mountainous Korean terrain. Thus, the inexperienced and under-equipped ROK units were defending the entire central and eastern parts of Korea, where rugged mountains and deep valleys made the operations very difficult. They were fighting against not only North Korean troops but also the Chinese soldiers. The Chinese were the same army that had won the Chinese civil war. It was essentially a guerrilla army trained to endure the "Long March." It represented the world's mightiest unconventional warfare force. The Korean soldiers were totally unprepared to deal with the Chinese. The prowess of the Chinese soldiers as fast-moving light infantry, their numbers, and their use of classic tactics of combining frontal attack to fix the enemy and then sending equal or stronger forces in enveloping moves to attack the enemy flanks and to cut off retreat routes were formidable.<sup>22</sup>

The enemy was waging its offensive against the weak ROK units. The ROK Army was badly mauled in the bitter fighting against the Chinese. It was a fledgling outfit. Before the war, the ROK Army had never conducted a maneuver exercise higher than the regimental level, yet it fought the war at division, corps, and even army level. Given the lack of training and the poor equipment, its performance could only be shabby, especially in comparison with two of the world's premier fighting forces—the armies of the United States and communist China.<sup>23</sup>

### **Intensive Wartime Training**

After the fatal defeat of the ROK III Corps in the spring of 1951, American generals had strong reservations about the fighting

capabilities of the Korean units, leadership and training in particular.<sup>24</sup> For example, General Van Fleet, Commander of the U.S. Eighth Army, reported to General Ridgway, Commanding General of the U.N. Forces, on April 28, 1951:

**The basic problems with ROKA are leadership and training; not manpower or equip[ment]. Lack of leadership extends throughout except in rare instances. If excess trained officers and non-commissioned officers are available they are needed in units presently constituted. Until such time as above deficiencies are corrected it would be a waste of vitally needed equip[ment] and supplies to permit organization and supply of additional units.<sup>25</sup>**

With proper training and good leadership, the South Korean was a good soldier. But after the near destruction of the army just after the beginning of the war, just about all experienced noncommissioned officers and junior officers of platoon and company level had been lost. There were no adequate replacements for them on short notice. The training of such leadership required establishment of the proper schools and several months of training by competent supervisors. Until the summer of 1951, young officers with inadequate training were filling the ranks of the Korean divisions. Major Eldon B. Anderson, who had been the Korean Military Advisor in artillery to the ROK 9<sup>th</sup> Division, summarized the qualities of the ROK soldier in the first year of the war and the limitations under which he fought.

Given the fire support, the training, and the leadership, the Korean soldier can't be beat. ... He is a wonderful soldier. He is obedient, intelligent ... and they have a good fighting spirit. They lacked leadership and still do to quite an extent, and they lacked training. A year ago, the infantry soldier got only 7 to 10 days training before being assigned to an outfit. They lacked fire support. ... Until recently they had no recoilless 57s or 75s; they don't have the 4.2" motor company in the regiment that we have; they don't have any tank; they don't have any antiaircraft. As a consequence, the Korean division should be considered as no more than an American combat team [regiment reinforced]. ... Many times, Korean divisions were given mission similar to those given American divisions and naturally they could not accomplish them.<sup>26</sup>

The Americans could provide weapons and equipment. But lack of training, especially the integrative effect of training on military units, was a serious defect of the army. Production of battle-tested and dependable leaders, from noncommissioned officers on up, could not keep up with the exploding demand from the ever-growing army. The

Korean government and the U.S. Army officials agreed that increasing the combat capabilities of the ROK Army units was a priority. Korean-American efforts to build an effective Korean Army began as soon as negotiations at Panmunjom started in July 1951. The U.S. Army developed a program called Concentrated Training for the ROK Army. General Van Fleet established the Field Training Command in July 1951 and a training center was constructed and a cadre of 150 U.S. officers and NCOs with experience in training was assigned to the center. Beginning with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, each Korean division took its turn in the training cycle of nine weeks. Training consisted of basic individual, squad, platoon, and company training. Every man in a division, except the commander, was required to undergo the training, and when the training was over, a unit had to pass a test before being assigned to the front. By the end of 1952, all 10 ROK Army divisions had completed the training. This training of virtually the entire force provided a firm foundation for today's ROK Army.<sup>27</sup>

In May 1951, each branch school also began an officers' basic course and an advanced course with the assistance of American military advisers. American military advisers were consistently increased from fewer than 500 at the beginning of the war to about 2,000 in early 1952. By the fall of 1951, the ROK military service schools were enlarged to handle more than 10,000 soldiers for armor, artillery, engineering, and communications. Specialist training was expanded, and tanks and heavy artilleries were provided to the ROK units for the first time on any significant scale. On January 1, 1952, the Korea Military Academy was reorganized with the first four-year curriculum, and a Command and General Staff College for higher-ranking officers was also established.<sup>28</sup>

In late 1951 ROK officers were sent to attend short-term, foreign officer training courses in the United States. Of these, 250 went to the U.S. Army Infantry School, and 100 went to the U.S. Army Artillery School. The command skills of these officers improved so dramatically that the program was repeated yearly thereafter. In short, the emphasis on training sparked the rapid maturation of the ROK Army, progress that appeared in numerous concrete ways on the battlefield. The Korean units revealed an elan and confidence and lost fewer men and equipment in combat. There was also a steady increase in the proportion of the front line under direct control of the ROK Army. By the time the armistice was signed, the ROK Army controlled two thirds of the front.

### **Buildup of a 700,000-Strong Military**

Before the truce, the need for the development of ROK forces

capable of taking over the role of U.N. forces became a priority. With U.S. President-elect Eisenhower's support during his visit to Korea in late 1952, an ambitious plan to double the 350,000 men force was vigorously implemented.<sup>29</sup> The First ROK Field Army was also activated in December 1953 to rearrange the chain of command. The First Field Army, with its operational and training control of five corps and 19 infantry divisions, was guarding the front line, and more than 60 percent of the 650,000 men were assigned to this army. The Second ROK Army, which was responsible for the support and control of district commands, reserve divisions, and service and technical schools, was activated in September 1954. On February 14, 1954, President Rhee appointed General Hyung Kuen Lee as the chairman of the newly established Joint Chiefs of Staff, which was responsible to develop national defense strategy. Thus, the institution-building of the modern Korean military was finally finished.

After the armistice, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the ROK and the United States was signed. The treaty provided the basis for the presence of U.S. forces in Korea; consultation on security; military aid for strengthening Korean military power; and support should an attack occur. Since the treaty, the U.S. has provided massive military assistance to strengthen the ROK armed forces.<sup>30</sup>

As the U.S. decided to withdraw six divisions from Korea between 1954-55, the ROK and the United States jointly sped up the buildup of the ROK military and discussed defense strategy in postwar Korea. In March 1954, as the United States began to withdraw two divisions from Korea, the gap was filled by the buildup of the ROK military. In May 1954 an agreement between the ROK and the U.S. arranged for the transfer of equipment from the American withdrawal units, and it was decided to expedite the improvement of the Korean armed forces. On May 22, 1954, the ROK 6<sup>th</sup> Corps was activated, and with this corps the Army had 20 active divisions and five corps headquarters. After President Rhee's visit to Washington, the ROK Army organized 10 reserve divisions.

All this reorganization and expansion took place a mere 18 months after the 1953 cease-fire. The far-reaching changes made in that brief period put the army of 1954 well on its way to being a modern force at the front and in the rear areas.<sup>31</sup>

In short, despite all the handicaps, intensive training and reorganization pushed by Korean-American joint efforts resulted in a tremendous buildup that made the ROK military not only very effective troops but also the world's second largest anti-communist force. Thus, the ROK army won the commendation of General Van Fleet as "the largest, most royal, most modern military ... of any Asian nation," and

of President Eisenhower as "splendid troops—real fighting men".

### *Effect of the War on the Military*

#### **A Strong Partner of the U.S. Forces**

The Korean War changed the foreign and security policies of the United States. After the war U.S. foreign policy postulated a strongly enhanced militancy and willingness to risk war on the part of the Soviet Union and its proxies, and called for a massive conventional and nuclear buildup to hold the Western position everywhere.<sup>32</sup>

**The** United States was terribly unprepared for a war in 1950. In 1945 the U.S. had spent \$50 billion on its army; in 1950 it spent only \$5 billion. In 1945 there were 8.25 million men on active service; in 1950 there were fewer than 600,000, and no one had been drafted since March 1947. During the height of the Berlin Blockade in 1948 there was only one American division in Europe.<sup>33</sup> The Korean War broke the mold of nearly complete military demobilization in the U.S. after World War II. After the Korean War, the United States gave greater priority to military security and maintained large standing armed forces in peacetime for the first time in American history. In the course of the war, the U.S. Army's strength nearly trebled, from 591,000 to 1.5 million, the Marine Corps' strength also trebled, and the Air Force and Navy doubled.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, the U.S. made worldwide commitments to contain Communist expansion. The priority of U.S. foreign aid thus rapidly shifted from economic development to military security. In 1949, the ratio of economic to military aid was about four to one; by the end of 1950, that ratio had been reversed.<sup>35</sup> The Americans began to build up the armies of virtually the entire free world. In September 1950, the U.S. decided to send from four to six American divisions to Europe, under an American commander. General Eisenhower was named as the first Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, and from 1951 to 1953 the United States distributed \$20 billion worth of military funds, supplies, arms, and equipment to its allies.

Without question, the Korean War transformed the American perception of security in Korea. No sooner had North Korea invaded than the United States directly participated in the war to defend South Korea. Thus, the U.S. policy toward South Korea changed from a low to the highest priority. Since then, the United States has undertaken great efforts to build a modern Korean military. The transfer of weapons, equipment, logistic support, and financial aid for the development of a strong Korean military became a primary U.S. goal in Korea.

The U.S. security commitment to South Korea, which grew out of American involvement in the war, was formalized in a mutual security treaty in 1953 and manifested in the continued deployment of substantial numbers of American forces in South Korea. The enduring commitment to the Republic of Korea and the continuous presence of a considerable number of the U.S. troops in Korea had the most significant impact on the development of the Korean military. As a result, the Korean military acquired modern military tactics and strategy through its participation in the joint command system with the U.S. forces in Korea.

Before the war and during the early months of the war, the Koreans were suspicious of the Americans. So were the American soldiers of the Koreans. More American soldiers held an unfavorable opinion of the Korean people. Korean civilians were viewed with suspicion as being possible enemy infiltrators, spies or saboteurs.<sup>36</sup> During the war, ROK and U.S. soldiers fought shoulder to shoulder, supporting each other, under the same command. They could overcome cultural barriers and became more trustful of each other. The wartime presence of up to 350,000 American troops in South Korea provided a mass impulse toward linguistic and cultural Americanization for the military.

In short, the ROK military became one of the most reliable partners of the American forces in East Asia and "a necessary arm of the worldwide system of free forces opposing the Communist drive for power."<sup>37</sup>

### **Military as the Most Modernized Institution**

The prewar Korean military, in contrast to the police or other civilian groups, remained a relatively unskilled and insignificant institution in South Korea. Despite President Rhee's rhetorical emphasis on national defense, there were limited resources to provide for a military buildup. The United States was also reluctant to support the development of a strong military in South Korea. As reviewed earlier, however, the Korean War dramatically expanded and modernized the Korean military.

During and after the war, strengthening the Korean military was a matter not only of national survival for South Korea, but also of grave strategic importance for the United States. Enormous human suffering and physical destruction reminded the country of its previous military weakness. The military was regarded as the savior from war and destruction. A strong military was not a means of national glory but a necessity for survival and insurance against another brutal war. Thus, national security became the primary goal of the nation, and the buildup of its military became the top priority of the Rhee government. Although maintenance of strong armed forces imposed a heavy burden

upon them, the people were prepared to sacrifice themselves materially and physically.

The United States also provided almost everything needed for the expansion and training of the Korean military: weapons, equipment, logistics, doctrines, and manpower. At the time the U.S. military was regarded as one of the most advanced institutions in the United States, and the U.S. government and civilian organizations had tried to apply military technology and managerial know-how to their institutions. The Korean military imported not only advanced American equipment and technology but also modern techniques of planning, management, training, and education. In other words, the combined effect of the war and the American support made the Korean military an unrivaled holder of modern skills, managerial techniques, specialization, and newly acquired ways of building and maintaining institutions in South Korea.

The sudden emergence of a huge and modern military had profound implications for Korean society. Among Korean institutions, the military was unique at the time. No other institution approached its size of some 650,000 men. The military had been subjected to consistent discipline and a modern educational process for a considerable period of time. No civilian institution came close to the military. The military was the only Korean institution in which the Americans had succeeded in concentrating sufficient funds, training, advice, and attention over a long period to transplant the American system in Korea. The Korean military, with its comprehensive and specialized infrastructure, became a microcosm of the state; it possessed its own separate and self-contained systems of supply, transportation, communication, engineering, and education.<sup>18</sup> The modernization of the military sharply contrasted with the miserable states of civilian institutions. The underdeveloped civilian sector had been almost completely destroyed, and it received no adequate support to revitalize and modernize its infrastructure and train its manpower.

In this regard, the relative importance of the military and the police needs to be noted. The police inherited the effective, but brutal, institution of the Japanese police. Before the war the police numbered 30,000 and were almost as well armed as the army; it was believed that various paramilitary forces such as the Youth Corps would provide a reserve in case of need. Moreover, the Korean Constabulary was established as a "police reserve." Thus, the prewar police were regarded as the most well-organized and powerful institution in South Korea, and consequently the police were more influential than the military. Because of the emergence of the powerful military, however, the status and power of the police significantly declined. Because of the rapid expansion of the military and its abundant resources, the military far

exceeded the police in prestige and influence.

In a pre-modern and war-devastated nation like South Korea, the emergence of a modern military was revolutionary in nature. Compared to other civilian institutions, the Korean military was the most modern, the most powerful, and the best-organized group in Korea.<sup>39</sup> In the late 1950s the military was regarded as the only social and governmental institution capable of unified, effective, and disciplined action.

### **Emergence of Professionalism**

During the war, and soon thereafter, the size of the Korean military was increased several-fold to some 650,000 men. Its rapid expansion inevitably resulted in some serious problems. After the truce, the threat of renewed invasion became less the focus of military concern than the corruption, ineffectiveness, and abuses of power in the military. The war aggravated corruption in the military. Floods of supplies and equipment were given to the Korean military. Strict control and accountability broke down due to the language barrier of the American supplier. The Korean military did not yet have central procurement and distribution systems due to poor market and transport conditions. Thus, cash allowance was given to commanding officers to buy vegetables, fish, and meat at local markets.<sup>40</sup> This procurement practice made corruption easy.

Salaries in the military could not meet the necessary needs of military families. Spiraling war inflation made this worse. Prices rose 750 percent in Seoul in the first year of the war. Low pay was not only a morale factor but also forced whole ROK units to take time for extracurricular activities to make a living for the families of their troops. The American supply service was also defective; there were insufficient spare parts and repair facilities for equipment, and a lack of funds for the maintenance of military facilities. Illegal cutting of forests and operation of small factories or fishing fleets went on to supply such needs. Corruption became rampant throughout the military.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the war forced the belated application of enough training and discipline to overcome factional divisions. The rapid expansion of the military made influential the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> classes of the Korean Military Academy, who were recruited outside factional channels and comprised the majority of mid-ranking officers. By overcoming its deficiencies, the military became the first Korean organization that eliminated most of the sources of fluidity and disunity. The elimination of factions in the military had important implications for the country, where factions dominated most areas of society. Thus, national interests came before personal happiness for the soldiers. They were ready to sacrifice themselves for the safety and

welfare of the nation. Decisions were made by the formal procedures of the military; traditional personal relations were less relevant, and formal channels of military institutions were important. This kind of military ethos could be contrasted with the attitudes and behavior of politicians and other civilian elites, whose lives were often preoccupied with personal connections and factional interests.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike most militaries of developing countries, the Korean military also had become relatively well professionalized. The military as a modern institution, according to Morris Janowitz, possesses modern skills, weapons, and equipment.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it was organized, managed, and commanded on modern organizational principles. The United States had provided almost everything needed for the development of a professional Korean military. The American military advisers assisted the Korean troops with training, setting up new military institutions and supply service, and procuring and dispensing U.S. military equipment and supplies. Korean officers were trained by American military officers in Korea and were also sent to military schools in the United States. All the senior instructors and most of the junior instructors had been through American service schools. After returning to South Korea, they taught by American methods, with American weapons and equipment, and from translated versions of American military texts and manuals.<sup>44</sup>

The officer corps not only needed to be thoroughly trained in purely military matters but also in managerial and administrative skills. The Korean military lacked officers trained to command large numbers of soldiers and to maneuver in open warfare. There was no unbroken military tradition, such as other countries have, to develop regular classes of officers trained to command. After it became a four-year institution modeled after the U.S. Military Academy, the Korea Military Academy, as well as the Korea Naval and Air Force Academies, attracted the country's top high school students, who graduated as first-rate professionals with solid undergraduate educations.

At the time, education was expensive, and the military provided free educational opportunities for those poor and rural. As noted earlier, the U.S. also allocated vast resources to the training and education of Korean officers and NCOs. More than 2,000 officers and NCOs were sent to American military schools during the war. After the armistice, more than 1,000 South Korean soldiers were sent to the U.S. for training and education every year until the mid-1960s. By 1959 approximately 10 percent of all South Korean officers had some U.S. training.<sup>45</sup> Through these systemic education programs, the South Korean officers learned and internalized the Western code of military professionalism.

Training is important in any military. But in the case of Korea, military training and education were much more important because at the time Korea's general level of education and technical skills was very low. To operate the modern military equipment and to make the goal-oriented military function effectively, it was absolutely essential for the soldiers to be trained in basic literacy, to acquire essential military skills, and to operate modern equipment. When they were mobilized, the mostly uneducated young people were forced to acquire their skills quickly so that they could perform their military duties. They learned the importance of discipline, loyalty, and cooperation, and were given opportunities to learn techniques for using modern equipment for transportation, communication, construction, sanitation, hygiene, etc. A farm boy, from a remote corner of the country, could learn to drive a truck or bulldozer, maintain a vehicle, repair an engine, operate a military radio, and construct a bridge or building. Therefore, technical training became much more important.

It needs to be emphasized that the introduction and application of the American military system to the Korean military was relatively successful because there was no Korean military institution. It was like a *tabula rasa*: there was almost no resistance against the import of the American military system. As a result, the Korean military was relatively well professionalized within a short period of time.

#### **Ideological Cohesion as the Bulwark of Anti-Communism**

In a developing country like South Korea, the mental aspect of the military experience is as important, or more important, as the technological one. Through the war, the military became the bulwark of anti-communism. Anti-communism was the ideological principle not only of the Korean military but also of the South Korean people. The people and soldiers could rally around the government and sacrifice themselves under the banner of anti-communism. The Korean military was successful in the indoctrination of anti-communism among young soldiers. The discharged youth have had a lot of influence on deterring the infiltration of communism into every aspect of South Korean society.

In the early years after the establishment of the military, the loyalty of some officers and NCOs was questionable. There were many people who strongly supported unification and therefore objected to the establishment of the ROK. Due to their diverse backgrounds, ideological confusion, and rapid recruitment without a background check, soldiers to the Rhee government and the ROK were not so solid in their loyalty. Most of the South Korean people, including military officers, lacked any understanding of democracy and communism.

They had a strong aspiration for national independence. However, the division of the country meant only half independence. Unification was regarded as full independence. Moreover, radical communist propaganda was partly succeeding; communists claimed that communism was the only "genuine democracy." Under circumstances of ideological confusion, many officers and NCOs lacked strong loyalty to defend the government of the Republic. They were not sure why they had to fight against their North Korean brethren.

During the war, however, the military developed a strong sense of identity and loyalty. As a result, communist-tainted officers and enlisted men were eliminated. By the end of the war, anti-communism was almost blindly accepted. Before the war, a considerable number of soldiers and people questioned President Rhee's anti-communist slogans, and some people were deceived by the honeyed words of communist propaganda. However, during the war, virtually all South Korean families became victims of communist aggression in one way or another. Therefore, the people strongly supported the military as the central force to fight against the communists. Unlike the questionable loyalty of some in the military that was manifested in the Yosu mutiny, during the war the loyalty of the military became clear and the mission of the military was to defend the ROK government and its people against the enemy: North Korean communists and their allies.

Anti-communism is only one of the military's characteristics in the Korean context. Military service also fostered a strong sense of duty and honor. The military sees its role as the defender of national sovereignty. Therefore, professional soldiers generally possess a strong sense of nationalism—a unifying sense of purpose, vision, and national pride—that is one of the essential requirements of nation building. The military developed discipline, a strong sense of mission, and an *esprit de corps*. The military is also highly goal-oriented: specialization, scientific planning, and efficiency and effectiveness are valued. This military orientation was sharply contrasted with the traditional values of most of the civilian groups.

### **Enhanced Social Status of the Military Officers**

Due to the war, the social status of the military improved to a great extent. For the first time since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the military became the most dominant organization in Korea and also the most trusted institution in South Korea.

Long influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, the Korean people encouraged mental and spiritual development rather than physical prowess. The man of arms, the symbol of physical violence, was considered inferior to the man of letters. Thus, the relegation of the

man of arms to a lower social stratum persisted throughout the history of Korea, especially during the Yi Dynasty, even in the face of repeated foreign invasions.<sup>46</sup> In the early years of the Korean military, most officers came from poor, rural families. Their social status was not much different from that of the traditional Korea.

During the war, however, many bright young men found in the rapidly expanding military a sense of pride, accomplishment, and a broadened vision. On the other hand, many civilian elite enjoyed the status of wealth. Many of them avoided military service by attending college or studying abroad.<sup>47</sup> National efforts to defend the country also led to the mobilization of national resources—personnel, finances, materials, etc.—into the military sector. As a result, the military became an actual center of national life; the civilian side became merely residual. In the history of Korea there had never existed such an organization that was so huge in size, so abundant in resources, so well trained in manpower, and so well organized in structure. This enlarged force was partially supplied by grants of over \$400 million annually from the United States, which amounted to almost half of the Korean budget.

Unlike in traditional Korea, it was the new Korean military that had the power, the supplies, the finances, and the men trained in modern administration, accounting, procurement, supply, transportation, logistics, medicine, construction, and communications technology. The officers and NCOs enjoyed not only modern equipment but also relatively abundant supplies, while most people were barely surviving.

Most of the higher-ranking officers learned English, a symbol of a modernized Korean. The wartime military was a ladder of extremely rapid fulfillment for the ambitious. The rapid expansion of the military prompted the incredibly fast promotion of officers; among 100 second lieutenants commissioned in 1949, 65 became generals in 1960, and most of them were in their 30s and 40s.<sup>48</sup> The emergence of a large group of well-trained officers was of particular importance. The officers usually included a higher proportion of able, energetic, nationalistic, and upwardly mobile individuals from low-middle class backgrounds. They tended to distrust the civilian elite, who came from relatively well-to-do families but mostly maintained the traditional problems of corruption, factionalism, inefficiency, and flunkeyism.

### **Conclusion: A Modern Military in a Pre-modern Society**

As discussed so far, during the Korean War the Korean military underwent modernization and became the most advanced and professional institution in Korea. After the war, the military, with its modern equipment and abundant technical manpower, played a leading

role in the reconstruction of Korea. The military built buildings, schools, roads, bridges, dams, etc. At that time the civilian construction sector lacked trucks and construction equipment, and it did not have experienced technicians. Without the contribution of the military, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the country likely would have been much more difficult and delayed. After the reconstruction, the military continued to support the construction of national infrastructure, including the Seoul-Pusan Expressway. The military also promoted a variety of civic action programs, which included medical services, social education, relief activities for natural disaster, and other social and economic services. In short, the military played a significant role in the reconstruction and development of the nation.<sup>49</sup>

The vast number of youth who served in the military during and after the war constituted a significant reservoir of technologically competent, organizationally experienced, and managerially skilled manpower in South Korea. Each year, the military was returning some 200,000 young men to the civilian sector after their service. The economic and social development of Korea benefited greatly from the manpower trained in modern skills and techniques.<sup>50</sup>

However, the civilian sector had changed little in the 1950s, and as a result the civilian elite failed to recognize the strength of the modernized military. Consequently, the emergence of the new military changed the traditional civil-military relationship. As Samuel Huntington points out, the enlargement and strengthening of the Korean military helped to aggravate the imbalance between the "input and output" institutions of Korean society.<sup>51</sup>

Military training, geared to the use of scientific rationale to produce the most efficient group actions, resulted in a major change in problem-solving techniques in Korea. Military training also provided a kind of faith, a sense of purpose and destiny that was often in sharp contrast to the depressing attitudes of the civilian elite. This functional outlook was in conflict with the civilian mentality of the old order, which was shackled by "inertia, inefficiency and skepticism." The civilian elite failed to recognize the fact that the military had rectified much of its past inadequacies by undergoing new and advanced education and training at home and abroad.

Officers tended to believe that the military had been the "guardian of the nation's security." One consequence of this attitude is that some officers, even today, tend to disdain and distrust the civilian sector, especially politicians, as self-serving, sometimes corrupt, and unwilling to sacrifice for the greater good of the nation. As a bulwark of anti-communism, the military tended to distrust those who advocated compromised unification with the North. On the other hand, the

civilian sector, especially students and intellectuals, maintained their traditional belief that they were the "conscience of the nation," and they tended to look down at the military as less educated and intelligent.

The enhanced status and influence of the military had a profound impact on civil-military relations in the coming decade. After the 1961 military coup, a struggle for legitimacy began between the civilian and military sectors. During the Yi Dynasty, the sole profession of the civilian *yangban* (literati) was the holding of public office. Thus, while the civilian *yangban* enjoyed the special privilege of governing, military officials were barred from high rank.<sup>52</sup>

Park Chung Hee and his military associates, who were proud of the sense of nationalism, efficiency, advanced knowledge, and discipline of the military, despised the inefficiency, corruption, factionalism, and flunkeyism of the civilian sector. On the other hand, the intellectuals (scholars, journalists, students, and religious leaders) and opposition politicians maintained the traditional belief that the civilian elite is superior to the military: more intelligent, more knowledgeable and competent. Therefore, military rule was not only considered illegitimate but also inappropriate.

The sudden rise of the military in Korean society inevitably brought reactions from the civilian sector—the posterity of the *yangban* who had almost monopolized the privilege of governance. Although the anti-government demonstrations during the 1960s-1980s reflected their aspirations for democracy, the deep-rooted cultural bias against the military also influenced their tenacious protests.

As Korean society rapidly modernized, the superiority of the military was eroded and some of the civilian sectors, such as business, caught up and then, probably, surpassed the military. Since the late 1980s, the civilian elite has led the government, and the Korean military changed its perceived role from a "new professionalism" to an "old professionalism." But most of the civilian sectors are still not as trusted as the military; this is due to the underdevelopment of their institutions and their frequent lack of professionalism.



## Notes

- 1 Chae-Jin Lee, "The Effect of the War on South Korea," in Chae-Jin Lee (ed.), *The Korean War: 40-Year Perspectives* (Claremont, Calif.: The Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies, Claremont McKenna College, 1991), pp. 114-5.
- 2 Young-Woo Lee, "Birth of the Korean Army, 1945-1950," *Korea and World Affairs*, vol.4 no.4(1980), pp. 639-56.
- 3 Robert K. Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in War and Peace* (Washington, D.C. Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962), p. 37.
- 4 U.S. House of Representatives, *Background Information on Korea*, House Report no. 2495 (Washington, D.C, 1950), p. 34.
- 5 Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 338-39.
- 6 Korean Ministry of National Defense, *History of the Korean War* (Seoul: Donga Publishing Co., 1967), p. 259.
- 7 Sawyer, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- 8 Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1961), pp. 13ff.
- 9 With a limited amount of military supply from the Americans, a great number of officers in the Constabulary still commanded their soldiers in Japanese uniforms and with Japanese long sabers. (Sawyer, *op. cit.*, p. 16.)
- 10 Michael Hickey, *The Korean War* (London: John Murray, 1999), pp. 27-30.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 12 Chum-kon Kim, *The Korean War 1950-53* (Seoul: Kwangmyong Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 147-52.
- 13 Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
- 14 Sawyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-78. In June 1950 the Navy consisted of four patrol crafts, 1 LST, 15 former U.S. mine sweepers, 10 former Japanese mine layers, and various small craft. The Air Force consisted of a single flight group of 12 liaison-type aircraft and 10 advance trainers. On the other hand, North Korea had a strong fighting force of about 200,000 men with 100 tanks and heavy artillery. North Korea air force had 100 Yak fighter planes, 70 attack bombers, and 10 reconnaissance aircrafts.
- 15 Hickey, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- 16 The defense plan aimed to counter a North Korean invasion at the 38th parallel but it said nothing about operations south of the Han River. (Sun Yup Paik, *From Pusan to Panmunjom* (Washington, D.C: Brassey's, 1992), p. 20.
- 17 Paik, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- 18 Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 21.
- 19 Appleman, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- 20 Out of all the divisions engaged in the initial fighting, only the 6th and 8th divisions escaped with their organization, weapons, equipment, and transport relatively intact. Except for them, the ROK Army came out of the initial disaster with little more than 30 percent of its individual weapons. One estimate of effective ROK Army ranges from General MacArthur's 25,000 made on June 29, to a Korean figure of 40,000, made July 1. (Appleman, *op. cit.*, p. 35)
- 21 James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the Korean War* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1988), p. 60.
- 22 Roy E. Appleman, *Disaster in Korea* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1989), p. 17.
- 23 Paik, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

- 24 During the early phase of the war, the U.S. troops had some deficiencies. The first American troops committed to battle in Korea were poorly trained, inexperienced, short of officers, and, perhaps most important, had gravely defective or inappropriate weapons and equipment. In the first action of "Task Force Smith" against the invading communist forces one bazooka team fired 22 rocket rounds at a tank without penetrating its armor. Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), pp. 91-93.)
- 25 Roy E. Appleman, *Ridgway Duels for Korea* (College Station: Texas A & M. University Press, 1990), p. 498.
- 26 Appleman, *Disaster in Korea*, pp. 369-70.
- 27 Paik, *op. cit.*, p. 162, and Sawyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-71.
- 28 J. Lawton Collins, *War in Peacetime: The History and Lessons of Korea* (Boston: Houghton, 1969), pp. 314-16.
- 29 "Here's South Korea's New Army,\*" *U.S. News and World Report*, January 9, 1953, p. 44.
- 30 Phil Williams, "The United States Commitment to South Korea," Phil Williams, Donald M. Goldstein, and Henry L. Andrews. Jr. (eds.), *Security In Korea: War, Stalemate, and Negotiation* (Boulder: Westview, 1994), p. 195.
- 31 In Korea, the US Army spent much of the first year rebuilding, training, and reequipping its forces, weeding out ineffective leaders and restoring morale. As one American general observed: "We went into Korea with a very poor army and came out with a pretty good one. We went into Vietnam with a pretty good army and came out with a terrible one." See Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 33.
- 32 P. Edward Haley, "The Korean War and United States Strategy," Chae-Tin Lee (ed.), *The Korean War: 40-year Perspectives* (Claremont, Calif: The Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies, 1991), pp. 25-45.
- 33 Stokesbury, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
- 34 *Ibid*, pp. 164-65.
- 35 Phil Williams, Henry L. Andrews, Jr., and Peter D. Duerst, "Reaping What Was Sowed: Effects of the Korean War," Phil Williams et al. (eds.), *Security in Korea*, p. 138.
- 36 John Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 88.
- 37 Mark W. Clark, *From the Danube to the Yalu* (London: Harrap, 1954), p. 165.
- 38 Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 357.
- 39 C. I. Eugene Kim, "The Military and National Development in South Korea," Korea Military Academy (ed.), *Armed Forces and National Development* (Seoul, 1981), pp. 260-61 and Se-jin Kim, *The Politics of Military Revolution in Korea* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina University Press. 1971), p. 66.
- 40 Mark W. Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-77.
- 41 Henderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 345-50.
- 42 *Ibid*, p. 336.
- 43 *The Professional Soldier* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960).
- 44 Mark W. Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-71.
- 45 Jong-Chun Baek, "Military Education System and National Development: The Case of the Republic of Korea Army," Korea Military Academy (ed.), *Armed Forces and National Development* (Seoul, 1980), p. 134.
- 46 Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 334-38 and Se-jin Kim, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV.
- 47 Paul S. Crane, *Korean Patterns* (Seoul: Hollym, 1967), pp. 154-57.
- 48 The most spectacular case was Major General II Kwon Chung, who at the age of 33 became the Army Chief of Staff and the Commander of the ROK Armed Forces during the war. Accordingly, the social status of the military improved remarkably. See II

- Kwon Chung, *Chonjaeng kwa hyuchon* [War and Cease-fire] (Seoul: Donga Ilbo Sa, 1986).
- 49 Jong-Chun Baek, Man Geum Ohn, and Young Ho Kim, *Hankookui Kundaewa Sahoe* [Korean Military and Society] (Seoul: Nanam, 1994), pp. 75-122.
- 50 *Ibid*, pp. 123-183.
- 51 Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 192-93.
- 52 Henderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 334-38 and Carter J. Eckert et al., *Korea: Old and New* (Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990), pp. 107-09.