

Theorizing The Untheorizable

The Korean War and Its Impact on Korean Politics

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Like all major wars of attrition, the Korean War brought devastation to the natural and human landscapes of the entire Korean peninsula. Not only did the individuals suffer, but also the social fabric that had held the nation together was irreparably damaged. Not exempt from the ravages of the war, politics also had to undergo transition. It hence makes sense to ask the question of what impact the war made on Korean politics. Seen from a short-term perspective, the war forced each side to taste the governing style of the opposite side—albeit with a strong military touch in both. During the first three months of the war, for instance, the South was occupied by the northern forces and ruled in "people's democracy." In the subsequent few months of northward march after the Inchon landing, the allied forces controlled the restored areas under "liberal democracy." In the period immediately following the 1953 armistice, the politics of each Korea saw post-war adjustments, the most pronounced of which was the bloody purge in the North of potential challengers to Kim Il Sung.¹

Of interest here is not the period of war and its immediate aftermath. Instead, our intellectual curiosity is on whether the war caused any long-lasting tectonic shifts in Korean politics. Limiting the inquiry to South Korea for now, we want to focus our attention on one aspect of political change—democratization. Has the war delayed the process of democratization in the South? If so, how? Conversely, was the war irrelevant or marginal to South Korean democratization? If so, why? Put differently, had there been no war, would the democratization process have taken a different pace and path? These are indeed challenging questions due to the inherent indeterminacy of historical "what ifs." The literature on the Korean War and democratization suggests numerous hypotheses about the potential link between the two.

Yet no authoritative view is available that is backed by a comprehensive theory capable of withstanding the test of empirical fit. Perhaps it is too daunting a task to theorize about what kind of lasting impact the war left on South Korea's democratization. Trying to theorize the "untheorizable" may nevertheless afford us a glimpse of the link between the two phenomena.

The main objective of this essay is to lay a preliminary groundwork for research on long-term effects of the Korean War on South Korea's democratization. It begins with some broad observations about the outcome of war with emphasis on the types of war—civil, international, and proxy. Then it moves to an examination of the major factors that influenced the democratization process and whether their origins can be traced to the war itself. Finally, it will attempt to suggest a direction we might want to take in future research.

Wars End In Win, Loss, Or Draw

While every war may be unique in and of itself, history tells us that there are three broad categories in the way it ends—win, loss, or draw. These are only the prototypical points on a scale marked by a total win and a total loss at each end. Even though almost infinite variations are possible on the scale, an examination of these three will help produce a rough sketch of the outcome of a war.

Win: What does the winner of a war do to the loser? A prerequisite to answering this question is the definition of winners and losers. But the fact of the matter is that the concept of win or loss is not clearly discernible. It could range from a complete annihilation of the inhabitants on the losing side to the acceptance of surrender with little physical damage inflicted on the loser. Even though a definitional rigor would surely help inform our thinking, it might not be counterproductive to exploit such conceptual breadth, especially in the early stage of theory building. Given the infantile state of our knowledge about the link between the ending of a war and its outcome, an inductive approach seems appropriate to delineate the various forms a win can take.

The wars of the 20th century have shown that there are a number of forms a win could take. First and foremost, the winner might conquer and absorb the loser in the classic manner of a zero-sum game. The case in point was the socialist integration of the southern part of Vietnam in 1975. Another form of managing the victory was exemplified in what the U.S. did to Japan after World War II. The winner would not force a merger or colonial control on the loser. Instead, the victor would transplant its system of political economic governance onto the loser while suppressing the latter's potential for

military growth. The idea was to make the loser a secondary power and client that would remain loyal and friendly to the winner. It was tantamount to a cloning process, if such were possible in international relations. Yet another way in which the winner might handle the loser was seen in what the U.S.-led coalition did to Iraq's Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War. That is, the winner would execute a punitive strike and hope the loser would remember the painful lessons long enough so that it could enjoy a relationship of deterrence, if not compulsion.

Loss: Turning to the losing side, what are the options available to it? The answer largely depends on what the winner would wish to do. In the case of conquest and absorption, the loser would get completely assimilated into the victor's system—political, economic, and socio-cultural. The loser would cease to exist as an independent entity. Should the winner wish to make the loser a semi-permanent client, the latter would have to surrender to the political will of the former and accept whatever terms might be imposed on it. While healing the wounds from the war, the loser could then wait for a chance to get even—perhaps not on the battlefield but on other playing fields. That Japan almost won an economic war against its conqueror, the U.S., must be counted as a compelling example. Moving to the third model in which the winner leaves after a punitive strike, the loser would not have to change anything while it might even be able to turn the military defeat into a political victory. Today Iraq is still considered a "rogue" state whose leader seems convinced that his hegemonic position in the region became enhanced as a result of the war. Similarly, one should not forget that North Vietnam needed barely two years to unify the country after the U.S. could not secure a win and had to pull out.

Draw: Unlike the win or its mirror image, loss, a draw most often restores the antebellum status quo. It would force the two sides to put utmost priority on maintaining the bilateral balance of power. Driven by a security dilemma, the adversaries would seek parity in war-fighting capability, which in turn is likely to ignite a costly arms race. At the same time, means other than a full-scale war might be utilized to continue the war-like confrontation. The Korean conflict fits the model almost perfectly.² When the war ends in a draw, it would be rare for the belligerents to make radical post-war changes in their political-economic system.

Different Wars Produce Different Outcomes

Whereas how the war ends shapes its outcome, there is another factor with equally potent effects. It is the different types of war, and discussion is limited here to only one variable depicting the status of the

players—namely, civil war versus international war.³ As seen in many civil wars, they are often fought to the end until one side becomes part of the other. If not halted for some reason, including external intervention, a civil war could drag on endlessly until a resolution is found in one way or another. On the contrary, international wars fought by two different nations could end without the winner absorbing the loser. And depending on the shift in the international power configuration, yesterday's enemy could end up becoming today's ally. Without being Clausewitzian, war becomes an extension politics—just another tool of foreign policy.

The Korean War began as a civil war in which the North attempted a quick unification by force. Due to the global bipolar confrontation, however, it became an international war between the two major blocs. While the Korean troops, South and North, were the primary belligerents in terms of numbers, they were relegated to a secondary position under the leadership of their respective patrons. In the first major test of the Cold War stability, they ended up fighting a proxy war. As principals, the U.S. and the former Soviet Union feared its escalation into a global nuclear war, thus, the Korean conflict had to end in a draw.

Combine how the Korean War ended—draw—with the complexity of a civil-international-proxy war and one cannot but notice the mixed nature of the post-war development. Simply put, it came to include some aspects from all three types of war as shown in the list below.

International-proxy war components

Continued division along the line close to the original partition

Military presence of external powers—first two, then one (U.S. forces under the United Nations command, after the departure of Chinese troops)

Dependence on the patrons who fought the war in military and nonmilitary areas

Armistice structure under international supervision

The system of governance on either side remaining largely intact

Civil war components

Persistence of confrontation and competition on all fronts—military, diplomatic, political, economic, social, espionage, and terrorism (anti-terrorism)

Continued emotional cry for unification—a sacred cow despite the fact that the half century of division has made the reintegration a herculean task

Though it is a select list, it clearly demonstrates the enormous influence the Korean War had left on the peninsula and its occupants. The Korean peninsula became one of the most important arenas in which the Cold War game of stalemate would be played out in the next 40 years.

Did the Korean War Affect South Korea's Democratization?

Despite the sweeping changes caused by the Korean War, did it affect South Korea's politics in general and its democratization in particular? At first blush, no direct impact was visible for two reasons. One was that the international nature of the war and its ending in a draw combined to restore the status quo in which the Syngman Rhee regime could remain untouched. If anything, his hands became stronger as he felt free to utilize anti-communism as the magic wand in legitimating his dictatorial rule. The other reason was the dire economic straits the country was in after the war and its heavy dependence on external assistance: ordinary citizens were simply too busy sustaining themselves to get involved in politics.

From a longer-term perspective, however, one could discern two domestic factors that grew out of war, which would later shape South Korean politics. The three years of war and the continued military tension necessitated a military buildup. In addition, the professional training many Korean soldiers received in the U.S. made the military a strong institution with Western-style organization. The military was becoming a force to be reckoned with. Along with the rise of the military, there emerged a new group of entrepreneurs who began to challenge the supremacy of the traditional ruling elite, many with roots going back to the *yangban* class. The military and new capitalists consummated a marriage of convenience after the 1961 military coup and led the modernization drive, which by the 1970s made South Korea one of the four Asian Tigers. Through the symbiosis of military authoritarianism and crony capitalism, they helped each other in securing a privileged position in South Korea's political economy.

It was not until the modernization programs bore a substantial amount of fruits and subsequently produced a large middle class core that military authoritarianism came under siege. Now that "their stomachs were full and backs warm," people began demanding political rights commensurate with their improved economic status. It was a poetic irony that the authoritarian regimes fell victim to their success. Even with Park Chung-hee's assassination in 1979 and the "spring of democratization" in 1980, however, democratic transition was slow to materialize. It was the mass uprising in 1987 that led to the first peaceful transfer of power—albeit between the former classmates of the

Korean Military Academy. In 1993 Kim Young-sam became the first president with no military background since Park's 1961 military coup, and then the first-ever lateral change of power was accomplished in 1998 from a government to an opposition party.

In light of the long history of military authoritarianism, it is commonplace to claim that the Korean War had a negative impact on the South Korean democratization. The reasoning is simple and straightforward: the war produced a strong military; the military took over political power from the weak, democratically elected government; and military governments used the carrot of industrialization and the stick of national security in extending their rule for almost 32 years—counting the Roh Tae-woo administration as the last leg.⁴

Now the critical question we would like to pose is, "Had it not been for the Korean War, would democratization have taken a different process?" It is impossible to run an experimental test with war. It is also impractical to run a quasi-experimental test treating the war as if it were an experimenter's intervention, since democratization did not emerge as a major issue until well past the war.⁵ Thus, one of the few options with which to tackle this question is to take stock of both the facilitating and inhibiting factors of South Korea's democratization before investigating whether any of them can be traced to the Korean War. Considering Seoul's heavy dependence on Washington in the post-Korean War era, it is important to look at not only domestic factors but also international influence with particular emphasis on the role of the U.S.

Domestic Factors: The Triad of Patriarchy, Military Culture, and Crony Capitalism

The most frequently identified inhibitor of South Korea's democratization is the patriarchal tradition in all layers of social hierarchy. In both the public and private sectors, Koreans have lived in a vertically structured society in which the communication flowed mostly top-down. Throughout their history, Koreans had never experienced Western-style democracy until after World War II. And this should not be considered a deficiency on the part of the Koreans. It was a rather common phenomenon not only in Korea but also throughout Asia. Even in Western Europe, one should be reminded, the modern version of democratic governance began only in the mid-17th century.

When the First Republic was established in 1948, Syngman Rhee, its president, considered himself the inheritor of the old monarchy and behaved like the absolute patriarch. Park Chung-hee, who took over power through a coup, did not hesitate to become another patriarch.

While Rhee founded the new state, Park thought of himself as the one who rebuilt it through industrialization. Chun Doo-hwan, who rose as Park's successor through a mini-coup of his own, also became a patriarch and wanted to be remembered as the leader who brought economic stabilization to Korea. Roh Tae-woo, who took the baton from Chun, did not leave the image of a hard-driving patriarch. But it was mostly due to his personality rather than any idealistic commitment to democracy. Even Kim Young-sam, who became the first civilian president in over 30 years, practiced "civilian dictatorship" according to his critics. At present, Kim Young-sam denounces his successor Kim Dae-jung as a dictator. Throw Kim Jong-pil into the political arena and one should be able to see that patriarchy indeed dies hard. Formerly the right arm man of Park Chung-hee, Kim Jong-pil is the third member of the noted "Three Kim Troika" that has been dominating the Korean political scene. To make the picture even more bleak, the top two forerunners of the 2002 presidential election are being painted as authoritarian, if not dictatorial, in their personal orientation.

The bottom line is that patriarchy is an inherent component in Korean society. As such, it is difficult to ascertain whether the Korean War made any distinctive impact on the patriarchal tradition. It is plausible to argue that the military, more precisely Park Chung-hee's charisma, might have enhanced the patriarchal tendencies. Nevertheless, the degree of enhancement could be insignificant, as he might have been riding the existing waves of authoritarian culture. It is through the maturation of genuine civil society movements, not the kinds that package interest group activities as civic service, that South Korea will see a gradual demise in patriarchy.

No less important than the tradition of patriarchy, military culture has been blamed for hindering South Korea's democratization. Although a pinpoint definition of military culture is difficult to formulate, a broad characterization is possible. First, it refers to the system of vertical control in which a superior's orders are carried out with little questioning from below. Blind obedience is required to conduct the affairs of war, but it becomes problematic when such is asked in areas outside strategic and tactical aspects of military operation. Second, military culture tends to emphasize results over the process. An atmosphere in which results justify the means is hardly conducive to democratic thinking, which values procedural justice. Third, the military prizes organizational cohesiveness and, therefore, discourages dissenting opinions. The latter are sorely needed for any form of democratic process to grow. Fourth, the military is run by the manuals: it has standard operating procedures for everything from the

way sleeping quarters are set up to how to conduct an air-land assault. Though a must for battlefield success, too high an emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency tends to dampen creativity. And creativity is another key ingredient for democracy to bloom. Lastly, the military culture is noted for its idolization of individual charisma. In the act of war where the irrational rules, it is easier to push the soldiers' morale by asking them to follow so-and-so's example than engaging them in an analytical discourse on why it is necessary to kill the enemy. It has been shown that charismatic worship does not go well with democratic governance, in which voices of the small people need to be heard.

Due to the system of universal conscription, young men in South Korea have had to absorb the military culture during the ages when they are sensitive to new ways of life. Once programmed in the military way of thinking, deprogramming is not easily achieved.

And many retired men chose to retain the military culture to promote their careers in the society controlled by the military. The civil-military relationship in South Korea can thus be categorized into what is called the "reverse penetration model," in which the military way of thinking pervades the civilian society.⁶ Once the military culture saturates the entire nation, it becomes self-evident that other cultures will find little room to take root. To worsen the situation, military regimes have shown extremely allergic reactions to students and their activities. Surely the ghosts of the 1960 Student Revolution must have been lurking behind the heads of the military leaders who would do anything to preserve their regime. To a lesser extent, the same was true about another class of people with the potential to challenge the military rule—labor unions. But the military apparently viewed the labor sector less threatening to them than student groups due to the fact that the former enjoyed a lower social esteem than the latter.

Turning to the central inquiry, had there not been the Korean War, would it have been impossible for the military to rise as a political force? While we cannot offer a clear-cut answer, we want to make a cautious speculation that the political ascendancy of the military might have been inevitable. The division of the peninsula and the constant harassment from the North must have necessitated a military buildup, while the war might have accelerated the process. Supporting this observation is the fact that it was not until eight years had passed before the military staged a coup, and even then it almost failed.

Lastly, the collusion of business conglomerates known as *chaebol* and the military-cum-political leadership gave birth to crony capitalism, which in turn is seen to have hampered the democratization process. It all began as a rather innocuous attempt by Park Chung-hee to help solve the national problems of hunger and poverty. That economic

growth would serve as the legitimating device for his military regime provided him with additional boost, of course. Driven by mercantilistic nationalism, Park first built a base for import substitution industries and then moved to an ambitious program of export expansion. As the "CEO of Korea, Inc.," Park even presided over a monthly meeting of industrialists and bureaucrats in order to promote exportation. Over time, however, corruption set in and Park's neo-mercantilistic capitalism degenerated into a crony capitalism in which the political logic dictated the terms of economic redistribution. *Chaebols* became bigger and bigger at the expense of medium to small industries. Not only did the government set the industrial policy, but also it chose which conglomerates would specialize in what industries. And in many cases, the choices were made not on the principle of competitiveness but on the criterion of political closeness at a given time.

Undoubtedly, crony capitalism weakened the political power of the business sector, which otherwise might have acted as a powerful pressure group against the government. Korean businessmen had to tune their antennae in the direction of the presidential palace. It was unthinkable for them to demand fair play according to the rules of the game or a change in the governmental decision-making. Once co-opted, many *chaebol* owners gladly became housemaids of authoritarian regimes, as they could exploit the labor class with the help of the government's coercive force.

Thanks in large part to the success of *chaebol-bastd* industrialization, however, the middle class was born, and it became the primary force behind democratic transition. Paradoxically, business conglomerates still hold on to the old, undemocratic, crony capitalism and resist the winds of change. Since 1993, the two civilian presidents have been learning at great pains that *chaebols* are quite resilient in withstanding the governmental efforts at structural reform. It is disheartening to observe that *chaebols* have been far removed from democratic ideals, although they indirectly helped promote democratization via the rise of the middle class.⁷ Most importantly, their behavior makes one believe that crony capitalism must have been an unavoidable development: *chaebols* would have linked up with the powers that be, whether military or civilian.

International Factors: America with Two Faces

Clearly the most important development that influenced Korea after World War II was the emergence of a global Cold War system along with the ensuing confrontation between the two superpowers over the peninsula. The focus of our attention is Washington's foreign policy

objectives in South Korea. Generally speaking, the U.S. pursued the two goals of regime stability and democratization in its two Northeast Asian clients. On the occupied Japan, the U.S. imposed a democratic constitution and a wholesale demilitarization. By destroying the legacy of militarism, Washington's planners sought to build a new Japan with minimal influence from the old guards. Unlike the divided Korean peninsula, Japan faced no immediate threat from the former Soviet Union, which allowed the U.S. to pursue simultaneously the two goals of stability and democracy. On the other hand, South Korea posed a different challenge to the U.S. The utmost priority had to be placed on the stabilization of the political military situation, given the precarious confrontation across the 38th parallel and later the DMZ.

It might be argued that the U.S. did intervene for democracy as shown in the 1960 Student Revolution when it persuaded the dictator Syngman Rhee to step down. But was that act motivated by a genuine intent to democratize South Korea? Or was it more due to Washington's apprehension that a prolonged crisis could lead to instability and might tip the balance in favor of the North? If the U.S. had truly been interested in democratizing South Korea, why did it not do much for its promotion until 1960, 12 years after installing Rhee at the helm? Similarly, America's delay in endorsing Park Chung-hee after the 1961 coup could be traced to its concern about his shady leftist background rather than an attempt to pressure him to go back to the barracks. The pattern continued with successive military governments in Korea, and one must note that it was part of the global policy the U.S. had maintained in the Cold War era.

At the same time, the U.S. did make gestures of support for democracy in South Korea—albeit at a scale not threatening the viability of the authoritarian regimes it supported. For instance, the American government saved the life of Kim Dae-jung in 1973 when he was kidnapped in Japan and was about to be dumped into the East Sea. And when Kim was implicated in the Kwangju crisis and sentenced to death, Ronald Reagan bargained the commutation of Kim's sentence in exchange for the invitation to Chun Doo-hwan to a summit meeting. While such duality may seem abominable, it served the U.S. quite well during the Cold War period. It helped showcase America's idealism and commitment to democracy, while at the same time helped solidify its perimeter of defense around the communist bloc.

Consequently, the answer becomes clear to the question of whether the U.S. might have pushed South Korea's democratization vigorously had there not been the war. The U.S. must have propped up the regime in the South, regardless of its character, as long as it remained a friendly and dependable client. Unlike in Japan, democratization was

not on the top of Washington's agenda in the post-World War II reconstruction program.

Conclusion

In our discussion, we have tried to focus on the question of "Without the Korean War, would the process of political development have changed in South Korea?" To answer the question, we have examined several factors considered to have affected South Korea's democratization and attempted to trace their origins to the Korean War. Our preliminary analysis suggests that it is difficult to make a conclusive case for the conventional wisdom—one which states that the Korean War allowed the military to rise; the military usurped political power, pushed industrialization, and suppressed democratization; and then the military authoritarianism fell victim to its own success in economic growth when the middle class it helped create caused its downfall. The weakest link is between the war and the rise of military authoritarianism; even without the war, the military could have become a source of political power. In addition, the model does not address the possibility of any government, regardless of its type, pursuing economic growth for the survival of regime and state.

Where do we go from here? Definitely more theorizing and research are required. We need to address a host of questions. If we accept the proposition that economic growth led to democratization, then what was the impact of the Korean War on economic growth? Discounting the short-term devastation, did the war help fuel the growth in the long run? Given the inefficiency and lack of strong leadership in the civilian sector, the military was perhaps better equipped to spearhead the economic development. Or was the miracle of the Han River made possible thanks to America's doctrine of hegemonic stability?

If we suppose that the economic growth-democratization link is but one plausible route, what are the alternatives? And what is their applicability to the South Korean case? For example, under what conditions might the U.S. have imposed the Japanese model of democratization on South Korea? In addition, the possibility of alternative explanations leads to an observation that economic development could be just a necessary condition for democratization. If so, what would be the sufficient conditions and did South Korea have any? And one may go one step further to speculate that, with a strong civic consensus, democratization might be realized even without extensive economic development.

By casting doubt on the conventionally accepted hypothesis, we are not trying to defend any particular ideology or political stance. There

is no hidden agenda in our research. We are simply making plea for a more open-minded approach to the study of the relationship between the Korean War and South Korea's democratization. As South Korea has yet to go a long way toward democratic consolidation, the proposed line of research will hopefully help reveal what paths to follow and what pitfalls to avoid.



Notes

1 For a detailed discussion of the politics in the occupied areas and the power struggle in North Korea following the end of the Korean War, see Bruce Cummings, "When Sparta Is Sparta but Athens Isn't Athens: Democracy and the Korean War," in David R. McCann and Barry S. Strauss (eds.). *War and Democracy: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 57-84, and Dae-Sook Suh, "The Korean War and North Korean Politics," in McCann and Strauss, 2001, pp. 161-5.

2 Technically, the Korean War has not ended as no peace treaty has been signed. Since 1953 an armistice is in force with the inspection mechanism in Panmunjom. For the purpose of our discussion, however, we will view the war as ended in 1953.

3 The types of war could include a whole array of variables ranging from the nature of the war (colonial versus independence war), who started first (preemptive attack versus defense), the weaponry used (conventional versus unconventional warfare), the duration (prolonged war versus blitzkrieg), and to the sanctions of an international body (collective security action). As research progresses, some of these variables will be included as the determinants of post-war political changes.

4 The literature on South Korea's democratization is replete with the themes along this line of argument. For an excellent review of the issue, see Hyug-Baeg Im, *Democracy in the Era of Globalization: Realities, Theories, and Reflections* (in Korean), (Seoul: Nanam, 2000). In a similar vein, a longer historical view can be found in Kongdan Oh, "The Korean War and South Korean Politics," in David R. McCann and Barry S. Strauss (eds). *War and Democracy: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 176-190

5 For a detailed discussion on the method of quasi-experimental design, see Donald Thomas Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, *Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963).

6 The author coined the term in his review of civil military relationship. The "penetration model" describes the communist regimes in which the party uses political commissars to brainwash and control the military force. The "reverse penetration model" describes the many cases of military authoritarian regimes in which the military, as rulers, impose their way of doing business on the civilian sector. For a comprehensive survey of civil military relations, see Tong Whan Park, "A Study of Social Change and Military Leadership (in Korean)," in *KookbangHaksoolNonchong*, No. 5, (Seoul: Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 1991), pp. 161-202; Morris

Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier* (New York: Free Press, 1971); and **E. A. Nordlinger**, *Soldiers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

7 For a more detailed discussion of the state-society relations and their impact on democratization, see **Tong Whan Park**, **Dae-Won Ko**, and **Kyu-Ryoon Kim**, "Democratization and Foreign Policy Change in the East Asian NICs," in **Jerel Rosati**, **Joe D. Hagen**, and **Martin W. Sampson III** (eds). *Foreign Policy Restructuring: How Governments Respond to Global Change*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 164-184.