

# **The Forgotten Army: The Republic of Korea Forces' Conduct in the Vietnam War, 1965 – 1973**

By  
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of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

South Korean participation in the Vietnam War (1964-1973) is like the United States' endeavors in the Korean War (1950-1953), namely both became soon-forgotten wars. Based on bilingual research in the U.S. and South Korea, this dissertation attempts to shed new light on the South Korean "forgotten army" in the Vietnam War. To find out why and how the South Korean (ROK) forces fought the way they did in Vietnam, this study focuses not solely on its military aspect but combines all the different elements that influenced the ROK forces' efforts.

The ROK forces were politicized armed forces that served South Korean national, political, and economic interests, and thus pursued "maximum efforts with minimum costs" to reduce casualties, yet to save face as a significant ally of the U.S. and South Vietnam. ROK forces conducted war as a separate entity exercising their own operational control based on the allied forces' parallel command structure. Most of all, the ROK forces proved its capability to be recognized as a capable, up-to-date armed force delivering a significant contribution to the allied war efforts in Vietnam. Their conduct of war focused more on pacification by using small-scale tactics which differed from the American way of war but proved to be effective in Vietnam. After Vietnamization started in 1969, combined with the rift between the U.S. and South Korea, South Koreans' cause and motivation for its participation faded. Because of the different interests existing in each country and its corresponding armed forces, the conflict among the Americans, South Vietnamese, and South Koreans accelerated during this period, and thus harmed all unified war efforts. Since the Koreans were not actually succeeding in realizing their war goals, the remaining economic benefits became a primary motivation for the country as well for its soldiers. As the end of the war without a victory neared in the Vietnamization phase, the Korean troops became more passive, and their morale and discipline deteriorated. As a result,

soon after their return to South Korea, their efforts were forgotten as South Vietnam vanished from history.

Lack of historical analysis and politically divisive evaluations have mutually contributed to the neglect of this topic. Experiencing the twists and turns during and after the Vietnam War, the U.S.-ROK alliance remains strong, and South Korea is now strengthening its ties with Vietnam. These conditions provide enough motivation to bring new life to the history of the Korean armed forces during the Vietnam War. This historical analysis of South Korea's most significant deployment of troops abroad not only provides a fresh perspective going beyond a competing political evaluation of the Koreans in Vietnam, but also offers lessons to current and future audiences. By adding a Korean perspective in the vast historiography of the Vietnam War, this dissertation gives a more comprehensive view of this war. This dissertation intends to start a new dialogue on the Vietnam War.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: The Forgotten Army of the Vietnam War.....	1
Chapter 1: “Why Did South Korea Enter the Vietnam War?”: ROK Forces’ Participation and Strategy .....	23
“Inevitable but Active”: Decision on the Dispatch of the ROK Combat Troops to Vietnam .....	23
The Difficult War: South Korea’s Understanding and Preparation for Participation .....	32
A Compromise Plan: ROKFV’s Strategy for Conducting the Vietnam War .....	46
Chapter 2: “Politics by Other Means”: ROK Forces’ Establishment of the Relationship with U.S. Forces in the Vietnam War .....	58
“‘It Is a Big Deal’”: The Operational Control of ROK Forces in the Vietnam War.....	58
Unofficial Compromise: The Reality of the Cooperative Relationship with U.S. Forces.....	67
The Americanization and Koreanization of the Vietnam War .....	76
Chapter 3: “Defensive but Effective”: ROKFV’s Tactics and Its Conduct in 1966.....	93
“‘How Do We Fight?’”: ROK’s Tactic in Vietnam .....	93
The Battle of Duc Co: The Success of the ROK Company Base and Its Afterwards Reality .....	103
Between a Political and Professional Army: Implications of the ROK’s Conduct in 1966 .....	124
Chapter 4: Different Style of Search and Destroy: The ROKFV’s Large-scale Operations in 1967 .....	137
“‘What Should be the ROK’s Priority?’”: Background of Launching ROK’s Biggest Operation .....	137
“‘Not Perfect in terms of a Search and Destroy’”: ROKFV’s Large-scale Operations in 1967 .....	144
“‘What is the Key for Success’”: The Reality of ROKFV’s Large-scale Operation .....	156
Chapter 5: Half Success: The ROKFV’s Pacification Efforts in the Vietnam War .....	168
Incompatible View: The Evaluation on ROKFV’s Pacification .....	168
Systematic Efforts: The Effectiveness of the ROKFV’s Pacification .....	176

“Win Hearts and Minds!?”: The Fundamental Limitation of ROK’s Pacification .....	185
Chapter 6: “War as a Lost Cause”: The Deterioration of South Korea’s Motivation for the Vietnam War .....	205
“Tet Offensive” in Korea and Its Impact .....	205
Korean Exceptionalism and Economic Benefits: South Korea’s Response to Vietnamization .....	220
Lost Cause: The Decline of South Korea’s Motivation for the Vietnam War .....	229
Chapter 7: “Why Are We in This War?”: ROKFV in the Vietnamization Phase, 1969-1973 .....	243
Leadership Change: ROKFV’s Response and Conduct in the Vietnamization Period .....	243
Economic Benefits as the Main Motivation: The Decline of Korean Soldiers’ Motivation.....	254
A Hopeless War: The Deterioration of the ROK Troops’ Morale and Discipline .....	261
Chapter 8: The Battle of An Khe Pass (1972): South Korea’s Pyrrhic Victory in the Vietnamization Phase of the Vietnam War .....	277
The Dilemma of ROKFV: Dynamics of the Three Forces’ Relationship During Vietnamization .....	277
Predictable but Unexpected Disaster: ROKFV’s Failure in Securing An Khe Pass .....	291
“Mission Accomplished!?”: ROKFV’s Large-scale Retaking Operation .....	301
Conclusion: Historical Memory and Its Implications for Geopolitics After the War .....	313
Bibliography .....	329

## Introduction: The Forgotten Army of the Vietnam War

On January 31, 1967, the 1st Battalion of the Republic of Korea (ROK / South Korea) Marine Brigade started the combined operation with U.S. forces. They supported the U.S. Underwater Demolition Teams' (UDTs) and U.S. Marine Corps' Task Force X-Ray's hydrographical survey operations at Cho Moi River in the Quang Ngai province of Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Viet Cong (VC) used this river as their supply route. The 1st Battalion commander, Lt. Col. Lee Gön-woo, allocated the 2nd Company to the north side of the river and the 3rd Company to the south side of the river. The 3rd Platoon of the 2nd Company landed from a helicopter on the Chau Me Dong riverside, the north branch of the Chu Moi River.<sup>2</sup> The platoon moved to occupy the objective "23" in Dong Xuan which was about 900 m from their landing zone. However, about a hundred VC occupied a defensive position and were on ambush position, ready to fight. The Korean platoon was taken by surprise and surrounded in a well-developed killing zone. The platoon received a surprise attack and was surrounded by VC.

The battalion commander could not provide artillery fire support because this area was out of range, so he decided to transport his reserve, the 1st Company, by helicopter to save the platoon. He asked for U.S. helicopters' supports, but it was delayed two hours. During the two hours, the platoon fought desperately. Medic Sergeant Chi Dök-chil was shot in the combat but continued to lead his squad because the squad leader had already been killed. He finally saw

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Gön-woo interview, 25 February 1980, Kukpangbu kunsap'yöñch'anyön'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chŭngöñül t'onghae pon pet'unam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], vol. 3 (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yöñch'anyön'guso, 2003), 223. The Institute for Military History at ROK Ministry of National Defense published three volumes compiling interviews with Vietnam War veterans.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 224

hope when six helicopters arrived, directing gunship fire to the VC. But the helicopters could not land because of VC's anti-aircraft fire. Only one landed with Korean soldiers but in a different area. Reinforcement operations did not work well, but in the turmoil of air support, the platoon was able to escape from the siege. The platoon finally met the evacuation helicopter, but Chi refused evacuation and sent other wounded soldiers even though he was shot eight times. Because it got dark, the second helicopter did not come on schedule, and in the end, Chi bled to death.<sup>3</sup> Thirteen soldiers were killed, and twelve soldiers were wounded, from the total number of 46 soldiers in the platoon. However, the sacrifice of courageous Chi saved his soldiers, and the platoon avoided annihilation.

This anecdote about Korean soldiers' struggle and sacrifice in combat is one of many untold stories of Koreans in Vietnam. Very little is known about the sacrifices and commitments of the ROK soldiers in the Vietnam War. The fundamental objective of this work is to tell the story of South Korean forces in Vietnam and to explain why and how Korean forces fought the way they did. Even though this dissertation primarily focuses on the military aspect of the South Korean participation in the war, their conduct cannot be fully explained with military aspects alone, because it was influenced by many aspects, such as political, diplomatic, and economic considerations. As a result, this dissertation attempts to combine all aspects to reawaken understanding of the nature of ROK forces' participation in the Vietnam War.

My purpose in the dissertation is to describe the Korean soldiers' war in Vietnam accurately and comprehensively. To do this, I will explore ROK forces' Vietnam War, by analyzing their participation and conduct of the war at every analytic level – political, strategical,

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<sup>3</sup> The 3rd Platoon leader of the 2nd Company, Lt. Pak Jong-gil interview, 27 February 1980, Ibid., 230.

operational, and tactical. Ultimately, I will explore several topics previously overlooked: (1) to acknowledge the sacrifices of the ROK forces, (2) to give credit to the professionalism of the ROK Army that lives in the shadows of the U.S. Army, (3) to correct views on why the ROK forces enter the war and argue that ROK forces were not a colonial army, (4) to understand the difficulties of combined operations, (5) to trace the evolution of ROK operations in context of changing American strategy.

In October 1965, Korean combat soldiers arrived in Vietnam. The Marine (Blue Dragon) Brigade left the port city Busan, South Korea on 3 October and landed in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, on 9 October. Later, the main body of ROK forces, the 1st Regiment of the Capital (Tiger) Infantry Division left Busan on 16 October and landed in Qui Nhon, the port city in south-central Vietnam, on 22 October. It was the first time in modern South Korean history that its combat troops were dispatched abroad. In the farewell ceremony at Yeouido Square, Seoul, the Tiger Division paraded before the President and about two hundred thousand Korean people who had come there to celebrate the historical dispatch. When ROK forces left South Korea for Vietnam, about a hundred thousand people gathered at Busan Port and gave a hearty send-off to their soldiers. When the first group of combat troops went to Vietnam, soldiers were proud of themselves and people were enthusiastic about their participation in the Vietnam War. South Korea's official objective was to save South Vietnam from communist aggression and help the U.S. who had saved them fifteen years before. In addition, the U.S. still maintained two infantry divisions in South Korea. Korean soldiers went to Vietnam as anti-communist warriors. However, when ROK soldiers arrived in Vietnam, they were not met with such an enthusiastic welcome from the Vietnamese people. Lee Man-jin, the 2nd Company Commander in the 1st

Tiger Regiment, said that “the Vietnamese looked at us impassively.”<sup>4</sup> There were a few people who were waving to Korean soldiers when soldiers were traveling in trucks after landing, but most of the Vietnamese did not welcome ROK soldiers. Ironically, it was the American forces who welcomed ROK soldiers for the first time.<sup>5</sup>

For what did they fight and bleed? This is the first question of this dissertation. ROK forces fought in Vietnam for almost ten years, from 1964 to 1973. During the years of their participation, ROK forces engaged 577,477 combat operations (above battalion level: 1,175, below company level: 576,302), resulting in approximately 16,000 casualties including 5,099 killed in action.<sup>6</sup>

South Korea was one of the major components of South Vietnam’s alliance. ROK forces were the second-largest foreign presence in the Vietnam War, after the United States. Simply considering the number of troops, South Korean forces’ participation was a significant part of the allies’ conduct of the Vietnam War. Their contribution to the war was remarkable in comparison with other foreign presences, including Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand—as ROK troops numbered more than five times the number of all other allies put together. With a total of over 320,000 combat troops serving in Vietnam, the maximum number of troops in any given year was about 50,000 with two army divisions, a Marine brigade, and noncombat support troops. The United States sent 2.6 million troops to Vietnam, or eight times more than ROK’s number; but considering the population of both countries, the percentage of Korean troops to

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Man-jin interview, 25 September 1969, *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 197.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; Bae Guk-jong interview, 30 August 1967, *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>6</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of the Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROK FV)], *Wöllamjön chonghabyön'gu* [The Comprehensive Research on the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, 1974), 391; Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol.10 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1978), 531-536; *Ibid.*, 554-555; Kukpangbu kunsap'yönych'anyön'guso [The Institute for Military History], *T'onggyero pon pet'ünam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and the ROK Forces Through Statistics] (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yönych'anyön'guso, 2007), 16-40.

population is slightly less than the United States' numbers (1.26% U.S. / 1.02% ROK). Also, over 90% of ROK soldiers were combat troops, while only 10 to 25% of U.S. forces were combat troops.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, South Korean combat troops stayed one additional year, until early 1973, after the U.S. ground troops and other allied troops withdrew from Vietnam.

Unfortunately, South Korea's involvement has received little attention in any comprehensive study of the Vietnam War. Even in South Korea, where this topic is significant to Korean history, there are surprisingly few book publications about ROK forces participation in the Vietnam War, and there are almost no studies about Korean forces' participation in English.<sup>8</sup> The lack of study on this subject becomes even more obvious when compared to the surprisingly large number of publications about Australia's or New Zealand's participation, countries that sent significantly smaller numbers of troops—in total and proportionally—to Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> Koreans and Americans alike have demonstrated very little interest in the ROK forces in Vietnam.

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<sup>7</sup> Christian Appy, *Working-class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 167; John J. McGrath, *The Other End of the Spear: The Tooth to-Tail Ratio (T3R) in Modern Military Operations* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007), 28-32; Meredith H. Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 25-26.

<sup>8</sup> Only two scholarly books are currently existing in South Korea. Yun Ch'ung-no, *Pet'ūnamjōnjaenggwa han'guksaheosa* [The Vietnam War and the Korean Social History] (Seoul: Parūnyōksa, 2015); Park Tae-gyun, *Pet'ūnamjōnjaeng* [The Vietnam War] (Seoul: Han'gyōrye ch'ulp'an, 2015). In English, the former U.S. I Field Force commander, Lt. Gen. Stanley R. Larsen wrote about the Korean forces in one of the chapters of his book. See: Stanley R. Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> There are various aspects of research in Australia's participation in the Vietnam War. See: Peter King, *Australia's Vietnam: Australia in the Second Indo-China War* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1983); Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey, *Australia R & R: Representations and Reinterpretations of Australia's War in Vietnam* (Chevy Chase, MD: Burning Cities Press, 1991); — *Vietnam: War, Myth, and Memory: Comparative Perspectives on Australia's War in Vietnam* (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1992); John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia's Vietnam War, 1954-1968: Silent Partners* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Pr, 2001); Jeff Doyle, Jeffrey Grey, and Peter Pierce, *Australia's Vietnam War* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2002); Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War* (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2014); Albert Palazzo, *Australian Military Operations in Vietnam* (Newport, NSW: Big Sky Publishing, 2015). About New Zealand's participation in the Vietnam War, See: Roberto Giorgio Rabel, *New Zealand and the Vietnam War* (Auckland, NZ.: Auckland University Press, 2005); Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand's Vietnam War: A History of Combat, Commitment and Controversy* (Wollombi, NSW: Exisle Publishing, 2013).

Furthermore, current studies about South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War are unable to fully explain the performance of ROK forces, because most studies about this topic focus on South Korea's political motive for participation and its effects. Against the big question of why South Korea participated in Vietnam, historians tend to give various answers: strengthening national security, improving the relationship with the U.S, and gaining the direct & potential economic profit from the U.S. and the Vietnam War, as the major motives of its participation.<sup>10</sup> Some historians have focused more on the Park Chung-hee regime, emphasizing that the Vietnam War was meant to strengthen Park's authoritative military regime.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, South Korea's participation in Vietnam was not only the largest military dispatch in South Korean history but contributed greatly to South Korea's national development. First, the Vietnam War was leveraged to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance, as the two countries' interests met with South Korea's sending troops to Vietnam. Even though their "honeymoon" relationship built by the war started to falter after 1968, the presence of the Korean troops in Vietnam still

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<sup>10</sup> Choi Dong-ju, Charles K. Armstrong, and Pak Tae-gyun see the economic benefit was the primary reason for ROK's participation. Especially, Pak argues that ROK's motive was changed from the national security to economic profit during the war. See: Choi Dong-ju, "The Political Economy of Korea's Involvement in the Second Indo-China War," Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1995; Choi, "Han'gugüi pet'unamjõnjaeng ch'amjõn tonggie kwanhan chaegoch'al [The Background to Korea's Involvement in the Second Indochina War]," *Han'gukchõngch'ihak'oebo* [Political Science in Korea] 30, no. 2 (1996): 267-287; Charles K. Armstrong, "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam," *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (2001): 527-539; Park, *Pet'unamjõnjaeng*. Scholars argue that focusing on national security and protecting the U.S.-ROK alliance were as strong as the economic motivation. Hong Kyu-dok, "Unequal Partners: ROK-US Relations During the Vietnam War," Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1991; Hwang Gi-yeon, "Han'gukkunüi pet'unamjõnjaeng p'abyõngdonggiwa kwajõng [The Dispatch of Korean Troops to the Vietnam War: Motives and Process]," *Oedaenonch'ong* [International Area Review] 23, no. 1 (2001): 97-113; Hong Seok-ryul, "Wihõmhan mirwõl: pakchõnghüi chõnsün haengjõngbugi hanmigwan'gyewa pet'unamjõnjaeng [Dangerous Honeymoon: ROK-US Relations During Park and Johnson Administrations, and the Vietnam War]," *Yõksabip'yõng* [Korean Historical Studies] 88 (2009): 216-243; Breuker R.E., *Korea's Forgotten War: Appropriating and Subverting the Vietnam War in Korean Popular Imaginings*, *Korean Histories* 1, no. 1 (2009): 36-59.

<sup>11</sup> Kwak Tae-yang argues that the ROK's participation in Vietnam was a dynamic force for the Park regime's long-term seizure of power. See: Kwak Tae-yang, "The Anvil of War: The Legacies of Korean Participation in the Vietnam War," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2006; —, "Han'gugüi pet'unamjõnjaeng ch'amjõn chaep'yõngga [Re-evaluating South Korean Participation in the Vietnam War]," *Yõksabip'yõng* [Korean Historical Studies] 107 (2014): 202-232. Also, Park Tae-gyun argues that the decision for participation in Vietnam was intended to preserve the Park Chung-hee regime. Park, *Pet'unamjõnjaeng*.

played a role in maintaining the alliance despite the Nixon Doctrine, which indicated the U.S. forces' prospective pull out from South Korea. Since the U.S. still need the Koreans in Vietnam for the success of the Vietnamization, the U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea ended up with the withdrawal of one division, not entire divisions.

Second, it was a turning point for South Korea to develop itself into an industrial giant. An unprecedented amount of aid from the U.S. and the special procurement of the war were catalysts for ROK's high economic growth; South Korea's GNP increased 2.5 times between 1964 and 1973.<sup>12</sup> Third, during their participation, South Korea was able to modernize its military with new weapons and equipment provided by the United States. As a result, participation in Vietnam laid the cornerstone for the ROK military to transform from an old-fashioned army into a modern army.

Nevertheless, the Vietnam War has become South Korea's own forgotten war. One of the fundamental reasons is that the Vietnam War became an unsuccessful war, in which the ROK military failed to accomplish the nation's external purpose: "participation as a guardian of the government of South Vietnam from the invasion of communist North Vietnam."<sup>13</sup> After South Vietnam collapsed in 1975, people gradually came to forget South Korea's enormous participation in the Vietnam War, mainly because the country they supported and helped disappeared in history. Their internal purpose of seeking and achieving South Korean national interest, especially for the economic benefits, was not honorable and therefore unable to fully justify their experience. This phenomenon reflected more the outcome of the war than the

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<sup>12</sup> Charles R. Frank Jr., Kwang-suk Kim, and Larry E. Westphal, *Foreign Trade Regimes and Economic Development: South Korea* (The National Bureau of Economic Research, 1975), 17.  
<http://papers.nber.org/books/fran75-1> (accessed 9 January 2018).

<sup>13</sup> "Wöllamjiwönül kangjo [Emphasis on Support for South Vietnam]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 19 May 1965.

performance of the ROK forces in Vietnam. Further, this memory of the Vietnam War has been closely connected to political and social changes in South Korea. The Park Chung-hee regime ended in 1979, but another authoritative military regime continued. The June Democracy Movement in 1987 brought the end of the military regime, and the public's criticism of the former authoritative military regimes became a dominant discourse in Korean society. Scholars followed that public trend, and this negatively influenced the interpretation of the Park regime's decision of participation in the Vietnam War.

After that, a negative perception of the ROK forces' participation started to fill the limited scholarship on this topic and caused controversy. South Korean scholars have questioned the legitimacy of South Korea's involvement. One of the prominent interpretation portrays Korean forces as a mercenary group of the United States, based on the fact that the U.S. government paid for the ROK soldiers.<sup>14</sup> In fact, U.S. payment of Korean soldiers was externally disclosed at the Symington hearings in the middle of 1971 when the U.S. senate raised a question about whether the Koreans went to Vietnam as mercenary forces of the United States.<sup>15</sup> As an extension of these arguments, other studies claim that Koreans were sacrificed by American colonialism and that they acted as assailants of the Vietnamese people.<sup>16</sup> In this context, widely-

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<sup>14</sup> Robert M. Blackburn argues that the Korean combat troops were serving in Vietnam as a mercenary force through the U.S. government's *More Flags* program, which inspired allied troops to serve in Vietnam. Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994), 31-32. However, Nicholas Sarantakes argues against Blackburn's idea that the Korean troops in Vietnam did not meet the criteria of being mercenaries because Korean troops served in army divisions which were never under the operational control (OPCON) of the U.S. Sarantakes argues that the ROK sent its troops not because they supported the U.S. effort in Vietnam, but rather because they considered their own national interest. Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "In the Service of Pharaoh? The United States and the Deployment of Korean Troops in Vietnam, 1965-1968," *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 3 (1999): 425-449.

<sup>15</sup> For more details, see Chapter 6.

<sup>16</sup> Based on Korean literature, Jinim Park argues that Korean soldiers were experiencing identity confusion between the colonizer and the colonized sitting on the sidelines in America's Vietnam War. Jinim Park, "The Colonized Colonizers: Korean Experiences of the Vietnam War," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 7, no. 3/4 (1998): 217-240. Charles K. Armstrong follows this argument, arguing that the Korean behavior can be explained by the difficult interstitial position of Koreans in a war with racial divides. Armstrong, "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam." Also, Jin-kyung Lee argues that South Korean troops were a surrogate military of the imperial U.S. Jin-

known literature on South Korea's Vietnam War depicts Korean soldiers as mercenaries of the U.S. and also as victims of the war and of the ROK military, which forced them to fight and kill innocent people.<sup>17</sup> Debate over massacres and atrocities committed by Korean soldiers is located at the center of this claim: some scholars argue that ROK soldiers deliberately killed civilians in Vietnam, while most veterans say that did not happen during the war.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence of the process of forgetting the war, adverse aspects of South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War stood out while the positive aspects were ignored.

Due to this complicated situation, interest in studying the military aspects of ROK's participation in the Vietnam War has lost ground. The only remaining historical debate in the military history field is about ROK's operational control (OPCON) in the Vietnam War. Most of the South Korean scholars and veterans argue that the ROK forces in Vietnam exercised an independent OPCON and conducted independent operations.<sup>19</sup> However, Stanley Robert Larsen, commanding general of Headquarters I Field Force in Vietnam, argues that ROK troops were under de facto operational control by the U.S. commanders. According to General Larsen, the

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kyung Lee, "Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity: South Korea in the Vietnam War, 1965-73," *Positions: East Asia cultures critique* 17, no. 3 (2009): 655-682.

<sup>17</sup> Ahn Jung-hyo, *White Badge: A Novel of Korea* (New York: Soho Press, 1989); Hwang Sok-yong, *The Shadow of Arms*, trans. Chun Kyung-ja (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Han Hong-gu, "Massacre Breeds Massacre," *Han'györye* 21, 4 May 2000, 26; Armstrong, "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam.,"; Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real America War in Vietnam* (New York: Picador, 2013). Park, *Pet'unamjönjaeng*; Kwon Heon-ik, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); —, "Vietnam's South Korean Ghosts," *New York Times*, 10 July 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/opinion/vietnam-war-south-korea.html> (accessed 9 January 2020).

<sup>19</sup> See: George S. Eckhardt, *Command and Control 1950-1969* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), 83; Sarantakes, "In the Service of Pharaoh? The United States and the Deployment of Korean Troops in Vietnam, 1965-1968"; Chae Myung-shin, "Pet'unamjönjaengüi t'üksönggwa yönhapchakchön [The Characteristic of Vietnam War and Combined Operations]," *Pet'unamjönjaeng yön'gu ch'ongsö* [The Research of the Vietnam War], vol. 1 (2002): 1-102; Choi Yong-ho, *Han'gwönüro ingnün pet'unamjönjaenggwa han'gukkun* [The Vietnam War and the ROK forces] (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yönch'anyön'guso [The Institute for Military History], 2004), 178-183; Song Jae-ik, "Pet'unamjönshi han'gukkun tokchajöng chakchönjihwigwön haengsawa ch'aemyöngshin saryönggwan yök'al yön'gu [A Research on the Independent OPCON of ROK Forces and the Commander Chae Myung-shin]," *Kunsayön'gu* [Military History Research] 137 (2014): 67-93; Lee Sin-jae, "P'awöl han'gukkunüi chakchönjihwigwön kyölchönggwajöng koch'al [A Study on the decision process of Operational Command Authority of Korean Forces in Vietnam]," *Kunsa* [Military History] 96 (2015): 283-322.

command and control arrangements for Korean troops was different than for other countries' troops, but that did not mean that ROK troops had independent operational control. Further adding to the argument is that there was no clear agreement about ROK's OPCON between the ROK government and the U.S. government.<sup>20</sup> However, this debate explores only a small part of the ROK forces' conduct of the Vietnam War.

The presence of ROK forces in Vietnam has been ignored in the political, cultural, and historical understanding of the Vietnam War. For instance, even the most recent and comprehensive 18-hour Vietnam War documentary series, Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* does not tell stories of Korean forces. Historians have not shown interest in how Korean soldiers fought in Vietnam. This lack of interest is unfortunate because the veterans of the war are slowly leaving us, and many of their stories will be lost forever. A foremost problem is that how ROK forces fought in Vietnam is historically unknown.

What was the nature of ROK forces' conduct in the Vietnam War? This is the second and main question of the dissertation. The disparity between "good war" and "bad war" has further widened as time passes. Instead of historical studies about ROK forces' conduct in the Vietnam War, the literary imagination, veteran's subjective stories, and people's expectation and discourse filled the story of Korean forces in Vietnam. Accordingly, the ignorance of the reality of ROK forces' conduct of the Vietnam War has widened the disparity in understanding South Korea's participation in the war.

The South Korean forces were one of the main actors who significantly contributed to the war effort. ROK forces were a significant presence in Vietnam not only because of their large

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<sup>20</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 133-135.

size of the deployment, but also their actual contribution to the war. ROK forces fought honorably, courageously, and effectively in Vietnam. They fought to save South Vietnam from communists, to support an ally who had sacrificed mightily for South Korea during the Korean War, and to strengthen the security of South Korea by strengthening its alliance and economic ties to the United States.

At the same time, this dissertation firstly argues that ROK forces functioned as a political army in the Vietnam War. The Korean troops in Vietnam trod a thin line between achieving a cause and pursuing a political interest. Based on Seoul's direction, Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROK FV) had to pursue political interests and minimize casualties. At the same time, they were to achieve satisfactory results in order to be seen as a capable army, thus raising the prestige of South Korea and creating good relations with both the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. As the ROK forces set a goal of "maximum efforts with minimum cost," they put much effort into solving this dilemma. Overall, they were successful in achieving their goal. The ROK forces' conduct in Vietnam was indeed "the continuation of politics by other means."<sup>21</sup>

The ROK forces were able to achieve their goal because they were both capable and effective in their conduct of the war. The overall second primary argument in this dissertation is that ROK forces proved to be as professional and competent as advanced Western army. ROK forces conducted their war as a separate entity, exercising their own operational control based on the allied forces' parallel command structure. Most of the time, ROK forces were recognized as capable, up-to-date armed forces delivering a significant contribution to the allied war efforts in

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<sup>21</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87.

Vietnam. Their conduct of war focused more on pacification by using small-scale tactics which differed from the American way of war but proved to be effective in Vietnam.

Even though ROK forces came to Vietnam with patriotism and a high level of pride and contributed to the entire war effort by fighting well, their morale and discipline declined dramatically after Vietnamization when the U.S. started withdrawing its troops. This is the third main argument of the dissertation. Vietnamization, along with Seoul's discord with Washington, tarnished South Korea's cause for participation in Vietnam. In terms of allied forces' conduct of war, because of the different interests existing in each country and its armed forces, the conflict between the Americans, South Vietnamese, and South Koreans accelerated during Vietnamization, and thus harmed all unified war efforts. The Korean troops in Vietnam faced hardship in conduct during the Vietnamization period. Facing a forthcoming withdrawal without victory and embracing no reason to stay except for high salaries paid by the U.S. ally and possible economic mobility when they returned home, the morale and discipline of ROK soldiers deteriorated. The motivation for gaining economic profits alone was not enough for soldiers to sacrifice their lives to the battlefield.

To examine and explain the performance of South Korean troops, I will divide the ROK forces' conduct of war into three phases. The first phase, from 1965 to 1966, was as an adaptation and adjustment period for ROK forces. Koreans tried to exercise independent operational control over their troops in Vietnam and focused on pacification in its assigned area by conducting a different type of operation from the U.S. Army. The second phase ran from 1967 to 1968, as ROK forces actively contributed to the allied forces' war efforts, by conducting more large-scale offensive combat operations and expanding its territory. The third phase is from 1969 to 1973, when South Korean forces started to lose support for the cause and motivation for

the war and showed various problems in their conduct of war. Due to Vietnamization and continuing negotiation for the peace treaty, without significant active military operations, the Vietnam War itself became dull.

Between the second and third phase, the Tet Offensive took place in 1968, the U.S. changed its Vietnam War policy and strategy, and both the U.S. and South Korea replaced the commander in chief of their forces in Vietnam. Meanwhile, right before the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, there was the North Korean version of “Tet Offensive” in South Korea, which caused the relationship to falter between the U.S. and South Korea and eventually dissuaded Seoul from escalating participation in the Vietnam War. As the war lost its motivation without any hope of victory, the quality and morale of Korean soldiers began to deteriorate, and only remaining economic benefits over patriotism became their primary motivation for the war. Also, the Korean public, who were initially proud of the performance of their military in its first expedition onto the world stage, began to lose interest in their participation as the war went on.

This project is based on research in numerous sources, recorded in English as well as Korean. The primary unpublished sources reside mainly in three locations: The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA II) at College Park, Maryland; The Vietnam Center & Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Lubbock, Texas; and Institute for Military History of ROK Ministry of National Defense at Seoul, South Korea.

Most of the American primary sources about ROK forces in Vietnam were produced by the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). The records of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam within Records of the U.S. Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1972 (RG 472) at NARA II, provided a clue in understanding ROK forces in Vietnam, especially in the context of allied troops’ overall conduct in the Vietnam War. Also, the Office of Civil

Operations and Rural Support (CORDS) files and the memorandums of U.S. forces evaluation of the Korean troops within RG 472 was vital to the understanding of ROK's actual conduct of combat and pacification operations in Vietnam. Among the countless collections in the VNCA, I mainly used Dale Andrade and Douglas Pike collections, MACV files, and Vietnam Archive. As microfilm in VNCA, which was collected from other archives, Johnson National Security Files, Papers of Westmoreland, Richard Nixon National Security Files, and U.S. Army Senior Officers Debriefing Reports, were used in the dissertation. Not only the official documents produced by the U.S. military but newspapers and magazine articles in the collection helped to hear various perspectives on the ROK forces in Vietnam.

The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense (Seoul) has about 3,500 primary documents about ROK's participation in the Vietnam War, including Chõnt'usangbo [After Action Report]; Pudaeyöksabogo [Troop History Report]; Yajõnhoebo [Field Operations Report]; Hullyõng [Directives of the Commander], and memorandums on diagnosis of the current circumstances, etc., produced by the ROKFV, two ROKA divisions, and the Marine Brigade. Very few people except the researchers working for the Institute for Military History have allowed use of their sources mainly because the facility is not open to the public. Luckily, I was able to browse the documents and got to know the Korean forces' perspective on their conduct in Vietnam. Besides the refurbished works, I was able to find ROK forces' original and initial view on their conduct through various documents. Also, this institute has eight volumes of the primary sourcebook, which contain the memorandums from headquarters of ROKFV for the ROK Ministry of National Defense.

Other primary sources, such as the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, documents in the ROK Presidential Archives, and sources from ROK Ministry of Foreign

Affairs, which were just released to the public, were helpful to understand the political and strategic level of South Korea's participation and conduct in the Vietnam War. These sources have significantly contributed to my dissertation to understand the relationship between the U.S. and South Korea during the Vietnam War and enabled me to balance American and South Korean points of view. Also, the Library at Korea Military Academy (Seoul) owns the 50-volumes of the primary sourcebook published by the ROKFV, which explains the ROK forces' conduct of the Vietnam War. Also, this library possesses soldiers' published memoirs. In fact, this dissertation filled its vacuum, where primary sources only cannot cover, with human beings' voices based on their memoirs, testimonies, and the author interviews. Especially, three volumes of *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], published by the Institute for the Military History containing a total of 692 individual interviews conducted from 1966 to 2001, was helpful in understanding individual's experience and perspectives. Also, newspaper and magazine articles at that time provide a significant aspect of the Koreans in Vietnam.

As a result, based on bilingual research, the dissertation pursues a balanced view of the ROK forces' conduct in Vietnam. Since the Koreans fought as a member of an alliance and depended on the U.S. forces for its conduct—more fundamentally, it was the U.S. policy that most influenced the Koreans decision-making about Vietnam—documents by both ROK and U.S. forces complemented each other in understanding the role of Koreans in Vietnam. Moreover, the cross-examination of South Korean and U.S. documents enabled me to recover the reality of South Koreans' conduct in Vietnam.

This project's exploration of the South Korean forces' conduct in the Vietnam War proceeds essentially chronologically, but it is also thematically organized. The first chapter,

““Why Did South Korea Enter the Vietnam War?”: ROK Forces’ Participation and Strategy,” argues that participation in the war was an over-all South Korean national issue. South Korea pursued its national interest—both to strengthen national security and to gain economic benefits—by using its participation as leverage with Washington. At the same time, it became a historical event for South Korea, as national pride was a motivating factor. Despite the fear of forthcoming combat, Korean soldiers had high morale and pride when leaving for Vietnam, with an enthusiastic public farewell ceremony. The atmosphere of the Cold War and anti-communism influenced the South Korean public and soldiers to consider the Vietnam War as their second front in the war against the communists. As a result, the official slogan for participation in the war, “defending South Vietnam from communist North Vietnam,” was not seen as propaganda but was strongly influential for the public and soldiers alike. South Korean people generally supported their participation in the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, Seoul and ROK forces shared perception that the political rather than military victory would be more important in Vietnam; based on their understanding of the war as revolutionary guerilla warfare, they had a pessimistic expectation for its future. Seoul wanted to conduct the war with limited efforts: seeking their interests while saving face. Consequently, ROK forces faced a dilemma as leaders attempted to raising the national prestige of South Korea through superior fighting and building a close relationship with the U.S. forces, while also considering their own interests and at Seoul’s direction keeping casualties down. To solve this dilemma, ROK forces set their goal as “maximum outcome with minimum costs,” building their strategy to focus on pacification. As an operational concept, they attempted to fight differently from the U.S. Army, which at that point focused on destroying VC; ROK’s focus was to isolate VC by holding and securing their assigned area by conducting both combat and civil affairs operations.

The ROK forces needed to establish a relationship with the U.S. forces in Vietnam that was different from their relationship in South Korea, in order to conduct the war according to their own strategic and operational concept. Chapter two, “‘Politics by Other Means’: ROK Forces’ Establishment of the Relationship with U.S. Forces in the Vietnam War, ” explores the relationship between the U.S. and ROK forces, focusing on the OPCON issue. Unlike the condition in South Korea where the U.S. forces exercised OPCON over entire ROK forces, ROK forces in Vietnam wanted to exercise independent OPCON from the U.S. forces. This chapter argues that there was no clear-cut establishment of who would exercise OPCON over ROK forces, despite conflict over that issue before and after the ROK combat troops’ dispatch. In late 1965, the two forces’ negotiation concluded with having “cooperative and coordinative” relations without any official regulation. Nonetheless, ROK forces eventually became a different entity in the Vietnam War, becoming a force to be reckoned with in Vietnam. First, the political considerations—both forces’ trying to avoid controversy over ROK troops as mercenaries and U.S.’s need for more Korean troops—forced U.S. military leaders to accept the Korean argument. Second, ROK forces’ success in the conduct of the war justified their exercising independent OPCON. Despite struggling to exercise OPCON to their own, especially at the beginning and ROK Marines’ arbitrary conduct, the Korean forces kept conducting a different style of operation from the U.S. Army based on ambiguous regulations for the OPCON. Third, structurally, allied forces were not able to build a combined command overall; the three forces of the U.S., South Vietnam, and South Korea belonged to parallel command. More realistically, when Koreans enhanced their numbers to become corps size in late 1966 and established field command in the battlefield, ROK field forces were able to work in an equal relationship with

their partners, the I Field Force and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) II Corps. As a result, ROK forces' subordinate nature to U.S. forces in South Korea did not apply in Vietnam.

Much like previous chapters, chapter three, “‘Defensive but Effective’: ROKFV’s Tactics and Its Conduct in 1966,” first argues that the ROK Army fought differently from the U.S. Army in an attempt to achieve its own goals and implement its own strategy. ROK forces adopted the operational concept of hold-separate-destroy, which differed from the U.S. Army’s search and destroy operation. Even though most of their tactics were originally drawn from U.S. Army doctrine, the Koreans adapted them for use in Vietnam. For example, while U.S. forces employed larger than battalion size bases to support conventional military operations, ROK forces instead employed a company-sized tactical base in order to focus more on pacification operations. U.S. military leaders were concerned that the company base was vulnerable to the enemy attacks; ROK forces dispelled those concerns by defeating an all-out North Vietnamese attack at the base defense in the Battle of Duc Co in mid-1966. After the battle, ROK forces actively advocated the advantage of operating a company base not only for pacification but also for offensive combat operations. However, internally, they faced a dilemma on how to operate the base after the failures of base defense in 1967. Since the capability of defense came to be considered as more important than the function of pacification, the base became like a fortification fixed in one area as the war went on. Again back to the chronological order, this chapter explores ROK combat troops’ conduct of war in Vietnam in their first phase. In their early stages of the war, based on different operational concepts and tactics in addition to some luck, ROK forces achieved success in the pacification of their assigned area.

South Koreans launched large-scale offensive operations based on the 1967 allied troops’ combined campaign plan. Chapter four, “Different Style of Search and Destroy: The

ROKFV's Large-scale Operations in 1967," argues that ROK forces' search and destroy operation in their large-scale offensive was, in fact, a clearing operation which was different from the U.S. search and destroy operation. This chapter analyzes ROK forces' large-scale offensive combat operations by exploring the most representative cases in 1967. Following allied forces' 1967 combined campaign plan, and pursuing both cause and interest, ROK forces launched Operation Oh Jac Kyo. This corps-level operation, despite being the biggest in ROK forces' participation so far, their success resulted from ROK forces' small unit performance and excellent soldiers, not from search and destroy based on firepower and mobility. The same outcome happened with Operation Hong Kil-dong, one of ROK's largest search and destroy operations in Vietnam. It was difficult to "find, fix, and destroy" the enemy's main forces, and ROK proved that primitive small-unit tactics such as reconnaissance, patrol, and ambush produced the best consequences in Vietnam. Even the fighting style was different; ROK forces were able to achieve success in the large-scale offensive operation and contributed to allies' war efforts by expanding their tactical area of responsibility. Meanwhile, ROK combat troops were able to arm with modern weapons, such as M16 rifles, helicopters, and armored vehicles, and had their own supply and equipment troops as a result of their success during this period. ROKs solidified as a capable army during this period.

The primary focus of ROK's conduct in Vietnam was pacification operations, as they set as their strategy. In addition to conducting combat operations to facilitate pacification, ROK forces actively initiated the civil affairs operation to win the heart and minds of people. Since ROK's approach to the pacification was systematic—by combining both combat and civil affairs operations, and staying and holding the region to isolate VC from the people based on building company bases—their pacification was successful in providing security to local people. The U.S.

media and South Koreans believed that ROK forces were effective in pacification, with some arguing that because they and the Vietnamese were both Asian they understood the Vietnamese better than did the other allied forces. ROK forces argued that their emphasis to “protect one civilian even if losing a hundred Vietcong,” was not just a political slogan, but actually reflected their efforts. However, chapter five, “Half Success: The ROKFV’s Pacification Efforts in the Vietnam War,” argues that ROK’s pacification efforts were a half success. Foremost, their efforts did not ultimately accomplish pacification, which was firm control of the region by the South Vietnamese authority. In reality, ROK’s approach was unilateral and lacked cooperation with the Vietnamese authorities. Fundamentally, they did not win the heart and minds of people. The Koreans had a reputation for being brutal, which had both plus and minus influence for the pacification, and their sense of superiority over the Vietnamese proved an obstacle to achieving people’s loyalty. ROK’s pacification were limited, as its overall conduct in Vietnam had a political restriction, and overall they were satisfied with their basic contribution to the pacification efforts, which provided security to the population.

The North Vietnamese and VC’s 1968 Tet Offensive was a turning point of the Vietnam War because it undermined the American peoples’ will for the war. Chapter six, “‘War as a Lost Cause’: The Deterioration of South Korea’s Motivation for the Vietnam War,” shifts attention to political and diplomatic history. This chapter argues that 1968 was also the turning point of South Korea’s participation, not because of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, but stemming from the “Tet Offensive” launched by North Korea. A series of shocking events happened one after another inside South Korea just before the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, and this “Tet Offensive,” caused by differing opinions about the North Korean threat, produced a rift between the U.S. and South Korea. This rift eventually led Seoul not to escalate its participation in the Vietnam War,

abandoning its original plan of sending one additional army division to Vietnam. Moreover, after 1969, South Korea's motives for involvement in Vietnam changed. At the beginning of Vietnamization and the Nixon doctrine, South Koreans expected that they would not be caught up in the U.S.'s disengagement from Asia and tried to keep seizing what were mainly economic opportunities in Vietnam. However, after experiencing Washington's unilateral notification to pull out its troops from South Korea and controversy in the U.S. senate hearings about whether the Korean forces were mercenaries, South Korea lost its motivation. Coupled with domestic pressure to pull out the troops, Seoul withdrew ROK Marine Brigade (about 10,000 soldiers) at the end of 1971. Economic motives, not national security motives, came to dominate; and participation in the war during Vietnamization served as the remaining leverage to keep seizing economic profits and to prevent U.S. troops' further withdrawal from South Korea.

The diminishing national motivation for the war influenced the troops in Vietnam. Moreover, the ROK troops had difficulty facing Vietnamization. Chapter seven, "“Why Are We in This War?”: ROKFV in the Vietnamization Phase, 1969-1973,” analyzes the impact of these changes on the South Korean forces in Vietnam. As Vietnamization started, ROK replaced the commanding chief Vietnam Lt. Gen. Chae Myung-shin with Lee Se-ho. The new commander emphasized fighting spirit to the soldiers and ordered more offensive operations in an attempt to respond to the change of the atmosphere. He wanted to prevent the decline of discipline and morale of his troops. However, they became more passive and defensive based on the unfavorable situations of reducing U.S. support and Seoul's strict restriction to minimize casualties during Vietnamization. Soldiers also became motivated by the pursuit of economic benefits, rather than a patriotic desire to defend their country. Witnessing the U.S. forces' withdrawal as well as its own Marine Brigade's withdrawal, soldiers were not motivated to fight,

regarding the war in Vietnam as hopeless for victory. As a result, their morale and discipline also declined and deteriorated during Vietnamization.

This study's eighth and final chapter, "The Battle of An Khe Pass (1972): South Korea's Pyrrhic Victory in the Vietnamization Phase of the Vietnam War," analyzes the battle as a case study to understand how Vietnamization impacted the Koreans' actual performance in the battle. On the other hand, Vietnamization caused more conflicts in the relationships of U.S., South Vietnamese, and South Korean forces. As the U.S. ground forces, who played the leading role in the war, withdrew from Vietnam, the South Vietnamese demanded the ROK forces share their burden. However, the ROK forces did not want to be aggressive because of potential casualties without enough U.S. support. Despite the U.S. forces' complaints about ROK forces' conduct, Washington decided to support the ROK troops by the end of 1972, because their presence was the minimum required for the success of the Vietnamization policy. Under these circumstances, as the North Vietnamese all-out offensive—the 1972 Easter Offensive—began, the Korean Army was involved in the fierce battle, the Battle of An Khe Pass. Coupled with their inherent problems during Vietnamization, South Koreans had the toughest fight with the highest casualties in a single battle in their entire period in Vietnam. Militarily, this battle was a failure, but politically it saved the face of South Koreans and justified their further station in Vietnam.

## Chapter 1

### “Why Did South Korea Enter the Vietnam War?”: ROK Forces’ Participation and Strategy

#### “Inevitable but Active”: Decision on the Dispatch of the ROK Combat Troops to Vietnam

South Korea’s decision to dispatch combat troops to Vietnam was mainly to pursue its national interests based on its relationship with the United States. Historians give various answers to South Korea’s motivation for their participation in the Vietnam War. Traditionally, many have focused on Seoul’s motivation to strengthen its national security by enhancing the overall U.S.-ROK alliance.<sup>1</sup> To prevent the U.S. Forces in Korea’s (USFK) withdrawal from South Korea and gain military aids from the U.S. to modernize the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) were the primary motivations to strengthen South Korea’s national security. Seoul had another considerable motivation, which was to gain economic benefits in return for dispatching its troops to Vietnam. Historians like Charles K. Armstrong, Choi Dong-joo, and Park Tae-gyun argue that economic benefits were the primary motivator for ROK’s participation.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Choi argues that the economic benefit was the primary motivator from the beginning of South Korea’s participation, while Park argues it became the primary one as their

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<sup>1</sup> Hong kyu-dok, “Unequal Partners: ROK-US Relations During the Vietnam War,” (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1991); Hwang Gi-yeon, “Han'gukkunüi pet'unamjönjaeng p'abyöngdonggiwa kwajöng [The Dispatch of Korean Troops to the Vietnam War: Motives and Process],” *Oedaenonch'ong* [International Area Review] 23, no. 1 (2001): 97-113; Hong Seok-ryul, “Wihömhhan mirwöl: pakchöngghüi chonsün haengjöngbugi hanmigwan'gyewa pet'unamjönjaeng [Dangerous Honeymoon: ROK-US Relations During Park and Johnson Administrations, and the Vietnam War],” *Yöksabip'yöng* [Korean Historical Studies] 88 (2009): 216-243; Breuker R.E., Korea’s Forgotten War: Appropriating and Subverting the Vietnam War in Korean Popular Imaginings,” *Korean Histories* 1, no. 1 (2009): 36-59.

<sup>2</sup> Choi Dong-ju, “The Political Economy of Korea’s Involvement in the Second Indo-China War,” Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1995; Choi, “Han'gugüi pet'unamjönjaeng ch'amjön tonggie kwanhan chaegoch'al [The Background to Korea’s Involvement in the Second Indochina War],” *Han'gukchöngch'ihak'oebo* [Political Science in Korea] 30, no. 2 (1996): 267-287; Charles K. Armstrong, “America’s Korea, Korea’s Vietnam,” *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (2001): 527-539; Park Tae-gyun, *Pet'unamjönjaeng* [The Vietnam War] (Seoul: Han'györye ch'ulp'an, 2015).

participation proceeded. While agreeing with South Korea's motivation for the involvement of the war, some historians argue that the Korean participation in the Vietnam War primarily led to the strengthening of Park's authoritative regime.<sup>3</sup> Overall, Seoul pursued numerous political, military, and economic benefits in return for sending their troops to Vietnam.

After the Gulf of Tonkin Incident on 2 August 1964, the Americanization of the Vietnam War—the U.S.'s full-fledged involvement in Vietnam—started. The U.S. implemented the “More Flags” policy, requesting support and troops from the international community to politically justify the war. South Korea answered the American request, sending small-scale non-combat units with 140 members for medical aid and instructing Taekwondo.<sup>4</sup> Later in March 1965, South Korea sent two thousand troops in non-combat units, called “Dove,” to provide military support for South Vietnamese civil authorities including construction and transportation.<sup>5</sup> In addition to sending non-combat troops, the Korean government further offered to send combat troops. In fact, South Korea had actively suggested to the U.S. to dispatch South Korean combat troops to Vietnam in 1954 and 1961, but each time, the U.S. government refused. Both times, South Korea's suggestions were motivated by the consideration of possible benefits by establishing a closer relationship with the United States. The two previous suggestions were related to specific events. The first, in 1954, came from the Syngman Rhee administration's response to the U.S.'s plan to reduce the ROKA after the Korean War. Furthermore, Rhee

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<sup>3</sup> Kwak Tae-yang argues that the ROK's participation in Vietnam was a dynamic force for the Park regime's long-term seizure of power. See: Kwak Tae-yang, “The Anvil of War: The Legacies of Korean Participation in the Vietnam War,” Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2006; ; —, “Han'gugŭi pet'ūnamjōnjaeng ch'amjōn chaep'yōngga [Re-evaluating South Korean Participation in the Vietnam War],” *Yōksabip'yōng* [Korean Historical Studies] 107 (2014): 202-232. Also, Park Tae-gyun argues that the decision for participation in Vietnam was intended to preserve and strengthen the Park Chung-hee regime. Park, *Pet'ūnamjōnjaeng*, page.

<sup>4</sup> Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994), 12-15.

<sup>5</sup> Kukpangbu kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *T'onggyero pon pet'ūnamjōnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Statistics of the Vietnam War and the Korean Forces] (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso, 2007), 27-28.

wanted to establish the Asia security council against the Communists, where South Korea could play a leading role with the assistance of the United States.<sup>6</sup> The second, in 1961, was because the new South Korean leader, General Park Chung-hee, wanted American acknowledgment and support for its newly-built military regime stemming from the coup on 16 May 1961.<sup>7</sup>

When the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, Winthrop G. Brown, started his new post in March 1964, he received a mission from Washington: reduce the number of ROKA supported by the U.S. in addition to reducing the USFK.<sup>8</sup> This plan created political pressure on the ROK government because South Korea depended on the U.S. for its national security. Seoul prepared a countermeasure to the United States' plan: send combat troops to Vietnam. On 3 November, General Kim Jong-oh, the chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested to Brown that Seoul was willing to send combat troops to Vietnam. Subsequently, President Park Chung-hee told Brown, "Korea [is] willing to send two combat divisions if necessary."<sup>9</sup> At that meeting, Ambassador Brown refused Seoul's suggestion, saying, "we felt that the time had not yet come for the introduction of outside combat troops."<sup>10</sup>

On 15 April 1965, when the war situation in South Vietnam worsened, despite the American air campaign, the Johnson administration decided to send American ground combat troops to Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> As they started to escalate the war, Washington needed more combat troops in Vietnam and became willing to employ Korean combat troops. From Washington's

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<sup>6</sup> Kwak, "The Anvil of War: The Legacies of Korean Participation in the Vietnam War," 61-65.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 78-79.

<sup>8</sup> Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Johnson, 31 July 1964, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1964-1968*, vol. 29, part 1, "Korea," eds. Karen L. Gatz (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), Document 345.

<sup>9</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 19 December 1964, FRUS, Document 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John M. Carland, *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2000), 19.

perspective, Korean soldiers were cheap yet well-trained, and moreover, their presence could justify America's Vietnam war, especially since the Koreans were the same Asians as the Vietnamese.<sup>12</sup> On 17 May 1965, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson officially requested the dispatch of South Korean combat troops at the U.S.-ROK Summit, during which President Park was warmly welcomed on his visit to America. Instead of accepting the request, Park said that sending combat troops "would have to be studied by [my] Government, and [I] could not make a commitment on it at this time."<sup>13</sup> Even though Park had already made up his mind to send combat troops to Vietnam, he intended to start bargaining with the U.S. to reap more benefits.

The South Korean government kept bargaining with Washington. Seoul knew that Washington was desperate to deploy the Korean troops because other allies did not actively respond to the U.S.'s request. In fact, the U.S. government was also well aware of Seoul's intention to bargain. In a telegram to the Department of State in March, Brown stated Seoul would seek national security assurance and could expect to get substantial benefits from sending their combat troops.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, at this moment, the two countries' interests coincided. South Korea was able to achieve its own national interests in the decision of dispatching combat troops, while the U.S. could gain the actual boots on the ground. As a result, in addition to the financial support for its deployment, Seoul received an American promise to cancel the plan to reduce the USFK forces as well as to provide additional economic and military aids and

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<sup>12</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, "ROK Troops for Vietnam," 15 April 1965, FRUS, Document 39; Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, "ROK Deployment RVN-MAP Transfer and Pay Raise," 10 July 1965, FRUS, Document 57.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 17 May 1965, FRUS, Document 48.

<sup>14</sup> Telegram from Ambassador Brown to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "ROK Combat Forces for Vietnam," 30 March 1965, Folder 2, Box 16, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), The Vietnam Center & Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive (VNCA), Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

support.<sup>15</sup> According to some historians, South Korea and the U.S. started a “honeymoon” relationship when Seoul decided to send combat troops to Vietnam in response to Washington’s request.<sup>16</sup> South Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War effectively changed the nature of South Korea’s relationship with the U.S. from passive compliance to the active partner.

South Korea’s official reason for sending combat troops to Vietnam was to maintain its national security against the communists’ invasion in Asia. On January 1965, President Park had already explained to the Korean people on his decision to support South Vietnam before sending non-combat troops to Vietnam:

First, our support to South Vietnam is the responsibility to protect the peace and freedom of Asia. Second, our support to South Vietnam is the defense of our country because the communist threat to South Vietnam is also a significant threat to the safety of South Korea. Third, there is our justice and solid resolution. We cannot tolerate seeing the communist’s invasion of our ally since we were able to repulse it owing to the support of sixteen countries in the past.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the Korean people had a vivid memory of the war, mainly because the Korean War ended only twelve years ago. Moreover, since the Koreans were battling with communist North Korea in the unending Korean War, based on the rampant and strong anti-communism of the Korean society, the Vietnam front would be another battlefield for them to fight against the communists.

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<sup>15</sup> Memorandum from James C. Thomson of the National Security Council Staff to President Johnson, 17 May 1965, FRUS, Document 47; Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Hong Seok-ryul, “Wihōmhan mirwōl: pakchōnghūi chonsūn haengjōngbugi hanmigwan'gyewa pet'ūnamjōnjaeng [Dangerous Honeymoon: ROK-US Relations During Park and Johnson Administrations, and the Vietnam War],” *Yōksabip'yōng* [Korean Historical Studies] 88 (2009): 216-243; Park Tae-gyun, “Pet'ūnamjōnjaeng shigi hanmigwan'gyeūi pyōnhwa [Changes in Korean-U.S. Relationship during the Vietnam War],” *Kunsa* [Military History] 89 (2013): 331-361.

<sup>17</sup> “Wōllamp'abyōnge chūūmhan tamhwamun [Statement to the Nation on the Occasion of Dispatching Troops to South Vietnam],” 26 January 1965, *Pakchōnghūidaet'ongnyōngyōnsōlmunjip* [The Speech Collection of President Park], no. 2, Republic of Korea Presidential Archives, Sejong, South Korea.

After agreeing with Washington to send a combat division to South Vietnam, on 21 and 26 of June, Seoul received Saigon's official requests to dispatch one South Korean combat division to South Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> Twelve days after making a formal decision to send one combat division to support South Vietnam at the Cabinet meeting, the Ministry of National Defense submitted a bill to the National Assembly on 14 July for approval. On 3 August, the Minister of Defense Kim Sung-eun answered the National Assembly's inquiry as follows. First, Kim emphasized that the safety of South Korea against the communists would be guaranteed by the collective security system led by the United States. Therefore, South Korea should send combat troops to protect themselves from a future war on the Korean Peninsula. Second, South Korea should not just sit on its hands while South Vietnam and the United States' position deteriorated during the Vietnam War. Third, the U.S. would likely withdraw its troops from South Korea unless South Korea sent combat troops to Vietnam. Therefore, South Korea should dispatch combat troops to Vietnam to prevent the USFK's withdrawal. Fourth, by showing South Korea's will to pay back what they received during the Korean War, South Korea could improve its relationship with the U.S. and other allies. Last, South Korea could raise its national prestige in the international arena and play a leading role in the collective security of Asia.<sup>19</sup> As a result, on 7 August, the Defense Committee of the National Assembly agreed to the government's bill to dispatch combat troops to Vietnam with the following reason:

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<sup>18</sup> Kukpangbu [Ministry of National Defense], "Wöllamjiwönül wihan kukkunbudaе chüngp'ae kwanhan tongüi yoch'öng [A Request for the agreement of the additional troop dispatch for the support of South Vietnam]," 12 July 1965, in *Kukkunp'awöl kwallyön kuk'oe chuyomunsö* [Collection of Primary National Assembly Documents Related to the Participation in the Vietnam War], 1964-1973. HB02624. Kukpangbu kunsap'yönch'anyön'guso [The Institute for Military History], Seoul, South Korea. "HB" is the document management number of the archive at the Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense, Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>19</sup> "Che 52 hoe kuk'oe kukpangwiwönhoe hoeüirok [The Minutes of the 52th the Defense Committee of the National Assembly]," no. 2, August 1965, 2-3. Kuk'oebömnyultosögwän [National Assembly Law Library], Seoul, South Korea.

We conceded sending our combat troops to support South Vietnam. The Republic of Vietnam is now under a situation of great concern by the invasion of the Communists. The Communists' threat to free South Vietnam actively and inactively influence our country's security in addition to South Asian free countries. Therefore, by fighting against Communists, we can recover the safety of South Vietnam, establish the shield of anti-communism Asia, and contribute to world peace.<sup>20</sup>

The official reason to send combat troops to Vietnam was to keep the national security of South Korea from the communists' threat.

Against this cause of keeping the national security, the opposition party—despite their thinking that sending combat troops to Vietnam was Park's scheme to strengthen his regime by diverting the public's attention from domestic political issues—was unable to find a good reason to oppose the bill. The Cold War logic—the communists were the biggest threat to South Korea, therefore, cooperate with the U.S. who led the free world—dominated Korean politics irrespective of the ruling and opposition parties. As a result, the opposition party did not show up to vote for the approval of the bill, and the bill was passed by only the vote of ruling party members: 101 in favor, one against, and two abstentions. Historian Ma Sang-yoon argues that the decision process in sending combat troops to Vietnam lacked compromise from all of the different levels of opinion in Korean society.<sup>21</sup> According to Ma, the National Assembly's role was passive in the decision making—even some of the opposition party members, who strongly opposed dispatching combat troops, could not or did not act aggressively.<sup>22</sup> In fact, members in the National Assembly, even those who were against the deployment for any reason, admitted

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<sup>20</sup> Kukpangwiwŏnhoe [The Defense Committee of the National Assembly], “Wŏllamjiwŏnŭl wihan kukkunbudaejŭngp'ae kwanhan tongŭian shimsabogo [Memorandum of the Judgement about the Agreement of the Additional Troop Dispatch for the Support of South Vietnam], Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ma Sang-yoon, “Han'gukkun pe'tŭnam p'abyŏnggyŏlchŏnggwa kuk'oeŭi yŏk'al [The Deployment of South Korean Troops to Vietnam and the Role of the National Assembly],” *Kukchejiyŏkyŏn'gu* [Journal of International Area Studies] 22, no. 2 (2013): 59-86.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

that they could not refuse the U.S.'s request because of South Korea's dependent status in the relationship with the United States.

Meanwhile, the Korean public generally supported the governmental decision to send combat forces to Vietnam. The external cause of fighting against communism was persuasive for the Korean people, where anti-communism was firmly instilled by the North Korean threat in addition to their Korean War experience. Further, Koreans were enthusiastic about their "historical dispatch."<sup>23</sup> At first, participation in the Vietnam War invoked national pride: "a country who has been helped by other nations is now going to help another country."<sup>24</sup> The discourse that since the international world helped South Korea during the Korean War, now it was their turn to repay, widely spread. At the same time, the Koreans regarded their participation in the Vietnam War as a breakthrough from their desperate situation of poverty. South Koreans had more expectations than the concern for their troop dispatch, which was "the first time in their history."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, when one combat division—two regiments of the Capital Division and 2d Marine Brigade—left for South Vietnam in October 1965, countless people gathered and feted soldiers in wild farewell celebrations held in Seoul and Busan, South Korea.

Seoul knew that South Vietnam's official request for combat troops was an ostensible reason to internationally and domestically justify their participation. The real reason for their participation was based on the U.S.'s demand. The nature of the two countries' relationship was unequal in which South Korea had depended on U.S. aid and support for its survival. Against the

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<sup>23</sup> President Park used the word, "historical dispatch," for the first time in his farewell speech at a mass meeting for the farewell of the non-combat troops in February 1965. "Wöllamp'abyönghwansong kungmindaeohwansongsa [Farewell Speech at the Mass Farewell Meeting for the Troop Deployment to Vietnam]," 9 February 1965, The Speech Collection of President Park, no. 2, Presidential Archives; "Paktaet'ongnyöngch'isayoji [Abstract of President Park's Speech]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 9 February 1965.

<sup>24</sup> "Maenghobudae hwansongshik yushi [President's Instruction to the Tiger Division at the Farewell Ceremony]," 12 October 1965, The Speech Collection of President Park, no. 2, Presidential Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

U.S. demand for ROK combat troops to Vietnam, South Korea, in fact, did not have other options except sending their combat troops. For example, the Operational Officer of the Tiger 1st Regiment, Maj. Seo Woo-in, explained to a company commander who could not understand the reason to dispatch combat troops in a hopeless war: “If we don’t go there, the U.S. forces in Korea will move out of here and put our national security in danger.”<sup>26</sup> Later in April 1967, President Park explained why he decided to send combat troops to Vietnam: “If we had not sent our ROK troops to Vietnam, the two U.S. Army divisions would have gone to Vietnam. ... Can we hold U.S. troops while we are not sending our troops? We could not hold them.”<sup>27</sup> Korean people agreed to this reason.

The American existence in Korea was vital and absolute to its survival. At the same time, Seoul recognized that participation in the Vietnam War would be crucial to South Korea’s national interests. Thus, Seoul actively sent combat troops to take the initiative in dealing with the U.S. to gain the maximum benefit from their participation. This was the best choice in terms of their national interests since South Korea would be involved in the Vietnam War anyway. Seoul continued to pursue maximum benefits for their participation, expanding benefits to economic profits in addition to strengthening national security. Following the U.S.’s request for additional combat troops after sending the combat division in October 1965, Seoul demanded increased guaranteed compensation from the U.S. in return for their additional troops. In his meeting with ROK Prime Minister Chung Il-kwon, U.S. Ambassador Brown explained, “[Chung] stated that President Pak, MND and he all agree that ROK should send additional

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<sup>26</sup> Seo Woo-in, author’s interview, 28 May 2018, Sönuga (Japanese Restaurant), Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>27</sup> “Taejönyuse yönsöl [Speech at Daejon Election Campaign Tour],” 17 April 1967, The Speech Collection of President Park, no 4, Presidential Archives.

troops we had requested but that U.S. help would be required in handling problems with political opposition and press that would arise when request became public knowledge.”<sup>28</sup> Vice President Hubert Humphrey visited Seoul twice, on 1 January and 22 February, and during his second visit, Humphrey got Seoul’s promise to send additional combat troops. Humphrey concluded, “I expressed appreciation for Pak’s understanding and support of our policy and for his sending Korean troops to SVN, and promised him that we would keep him fully informed about our plans and actions. We considered Korea as an ally and equal and proposed to treat her as such.”<sup>29</sup> Washington accepted most of Seoul’s requests and signed the “Brown Memorandum” to pledge support to South Korea’s economy by offering more economic aids and modernize the ROK Army with additional military aid.<sup>30</sup> On 4 April 1966, one regiment of the Capital Division arrived in South Vietnam and the 9th Division deployed to Vietnam by October 1966. At this moment, the total number of the Korean forces in Vietnam was over 50,000 with two army divisions, a Marine brigade, and non-combat support troops. It then became truly a historical deployment for the Koreans.

### **The Difficult War: South Korea’s Understanding and Preparation for Participation**

Despite participating as one of the American and South Vietnamese allies, South Korea had its own ambitions for the Vietnam War: pursuing national interests. However, the prospects of the Vietnam War were not bright. Before the National Assembly’s vote for the ROK combat troop deployment bill in July 1965, Park Jong-tae, a lawmaker from the ruling party, argued

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<sup>28</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, 22 December 1965, FRUS, Document 63.

<sup>29</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to White House, 23 February 1966, FRUS, Document 80.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 31 October 1978), 393.

several points. First, even the U.S. had controversy and problems on their engagement in the Vietnam Conflict. Second, the U.S.'s military involvement showed its lack of "humanism" in its attitude toward the undeveloped country. Third, there was nationalism or anti-America sentiment behind the Vietnam Conflict. Fourth, South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War would become a domestic political issue and would reveal South Korea militarily and politically to the communists. Lastly, since the Vietnam War was already a protracted war, the result of the war would be worrisome.<sup>31</sup>

Answering Park's concerns, Minister of Defense Kim Sung-eun expressed the ROK military's perspective on the Vietnam War. He agreed that the prospects for the Vietnam War were never bright, arguing, "the reason we are sending our troops to Vietnam is not that the condition of the patient has a possibility to be improved, but because the patient would die if we were not sending our troops. ... At first, we should prevent the patient from dying and then find the way to survive him, or at least we need to earn time to save him."<sup>32</sup> Seoul also doubted the possibility of military victory in the Vietnam War; from their perspective, there were many uncertainties ahead, and the situation seemed to be more difficult for the U.S. and South Vietnam without aggressive American support.<sup>33</sup> Like the American policy, which aimed at a status quo and stability in Vietnam, Seoul did not expect victory in the Vietnam War; as Kim explained against the reason to participate in the war without hope for victory, "the free countries' goal for this war is to achieve an armistice with a better condition."<sup>34</sup> As a result, South Korea's military

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<sup>31</sup> "Che 52 hoe kuk'oe kukpangwiwŏnhoe hoeüirok [The Minutes of the 52th the Defense Committee of the National Assembly]," no. 3, August 1965, 8-10, National Assembly Law Library.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Yi Dong-wŏn, *Taet'ongnyŏngül kŭrimyŏ* [Missing the President] (Seoul: Koryŏwŏn, 1992), 109.

<sup>34</sup> "Che 52 hoe kuk'oe kukpangwiwŏnhoe hoeüirok," no. 3, 12.

objective was limited from the beginning: to make South Vietnam stable by deterring the VC and North Vietnam and by cooperating with the U.S. and South Vietnam.

The Korean military, as well as Seoul, shared the perception of the Vietnam War as an “uncertain” and a “very difficult” war.<sup>35</sup> The South Korean forces’ understanding of the Vietnam War was complex. At first, they recognized that the Vietnam War was primarily guerilla warfare. Even though the ROK military had assumed that the Vietnam War would eventually turn into a conventional war depending on American efforts, Seoul and the ROK military’s understanding of this war as a guerrilla war was the primary reason to assign Maj. Gen. Chae Myung-shin (promoted to lieutenant general in July 1966) as ROKFV’s first commander. Unlike most of the Korean senior officers experienced with conventional operations, such as the most promising contender Maj. Gen. Lee Byung-hyung regarded as the best expert on military operations and tactics, Chae had a distinguished career of profound experience in unconventional war.<sup>36</sup> As the commander of the ROK’s guerrilla warfare troop in the Korean War, he played an essential role in assassinating enemy leaders and supporting anti-communist civilians behind enemy lines.<sup>37</sup>

It was a common perception in ROK military that the war in Vietnam was a war without fronts: “the Viet Cong may be everywhere or they may be nowhere.”<sup>38</sup> Since the guerillas lived with the people, it was hard to differentiate between the people and the VC. Moreover, the VC fought when and where they wanted to fight by using hit and run tactics. Therefore, from the

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<sup>35</sup> Chae Myung-shin, *Pet’ūnamjōnjaenggwa na* [The Vietnam War and I] (Seoul: P’albogwōn, 2006), 225.

<sup>36</sup> Even General Chae wondered at first because General was originally intended to be nominated. Park Kyung-suk, *Chōnjaengyōngung ch’aemyōngshin changgun* [A War Hero General Chae] (Seoul: P’albogwōn, 2018), 220-221.

<sup>37</sup> For more details, see: Chae Myung-shin, *Sasōnūl nōmgo nōmō* [Survive a Life-or-Death Crisis] (Seoul: Maelgyōngjeshinmunsa, 1994); Kukpangbu kunsap’yōnch’anyōn’guso [The Institute for Military History], *Han’gukchōnjaengūi yugyōkchōnsa* [Guerrilla Warfare in the Korean War] (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap’yōnch’anyōn’guso, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> The Tiger Division, “Company Tactical Base Concept,” 1967, in Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chungdaejōnsulgijjaryo* [Primary Sources about the Company Tactical Base], 20 January 1971, HB01685.

beginning, General Chae doubted the effectiveness of the U.S. forces' concept of the operation—search and destroy—which focused on destroying the enemy's main forces.<sup>39</sup> ROKFV's chronicle in 1967 delineated, “we cannot achieve the desired outcome in the Vietnam War with the conventional strategy based on firepower,” because of the nature of this war.<sup>40</sup> Later, in the research at ROK Joint Forces Staff College in 1967, Lt. Col. Ji admitted that allied troops had a hard time grasping the size of the enemy forces and the ways many insurgents were infiltrating from the North due to the limitation of effective intelligence. North Vietnam and the VC kept seizing the initiative in the war despite the U.S. and ROK ground combat troops' gradual presence.<sup>41</sup>

Second, the ROK military, like the American forces, regarded the Vietnam War as a revolutionary war. However, when it comes to understanding the nature of the war, the Koreans gave more weight to the political rather than military aspect. They saw that the South Vietnamese had already been losing this political war. The prospects of ROK military attaché to South Vietnam for the Vietnam War in early 1965 is noteworthy:

The most important question is when the shift from Viet Cong's second phase of the resistance to the final phase of the counteroffensive will take place. If the Viet Cong enters the counteroffensive phase, the collapse of the ARVN will occur in a short time. This can be easily anticipated based on historical facts such as the Chinese Civil War after World War II, the Indochina War, and the Russian Civil War at the end of World War I.

In fact, without U.S. support and aid, Viet Cong can shift to the strategic offensive right now; and if the assistance from the U.S. ceases, within a week or two, Viet

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<sup>39</sup> Chae, *Pet'ūnamjōnjaenggwa na*, 174-175; Chae Myung-shin interview, 1 August 1969, Kukpangbu kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chūngōnūl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chōnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], vol. 1 (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso, 2001), 65-66.

<sup>40</sup> Chuwōl han'gukkun saryōngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], “Chuwōl han'gukkun chi [A Chronicle of ROKFV],” December 1967, HB02052.

<sup>41</sup> Haptongch'ammodaehak [ROK Armed Forces Staff College], Lt. Col. Ji Deok-geon, “Wōllamjōnesōūi han'gukkun chōnsurūi t'adangsōng yōbu [Questions for the Validity of the Tactic of the ROK Forces in the Vietnam War],” 1967, HB02032.

Cong will be able to take over the entire South Vietnam. Out of the 500,000 ARVN troops, the Marine Brigade (four battalions) and the Airborne Brigade (six battalions) are the only units that have the military spirit to resist the Viet Cong till the last. If the U.S. continued to support South Vietnam effectively, and the third-party supported South Vietnam, and most of all when South Vietnamese had an efficient and stable government to control the country, after a long time (perhaps five to ten years later), it would be not entirely impossible that the Viet Cong would retreat to the first phase and would weaken and perish.

However, like today, if the government of the Republic of Vietnam is still helpless, and senior military officers and government officials are corrupt both materially and morally, taking bribes, lustful, illegally accumulating wealth, and satisfying personal ambitions—despite the support and aid from the U.S. and the third country, unless the U.S. does not take action to pursue all-out war such as using the atomic bomb—it is too certain that the Viet Cong would shift to the strategic offensive and sweep South Vietnam.<sup>42</sup>

As a reason for the South Vietnamese losing, this document offered that the VC's conduct of war was effective following the revolutionary strategy: 1. "Defense Phase [Strategic Defensive]," 2. "Resistance Phase [Stalemate]," 3. "Counter Offensive Phase [Strategic Offensive]," while the South Vietnamese had not responded adequately to the enemy forces strategy.<sup>43</sup>

When General Chae became a commander, he shared and reconfirmed the idea with President Park that the Vietnam War was indeed a revolutionary war, and its nature was primarily unconventional.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, General Chae's perception of the conflict and the South Korean forces' participation was even more complex than other ROK military brass. He conceived the Vietnam War as a political rather than military conflict. From the beginning, he was pessimistic about the possibility of winning, because he thought the fight was based on Mao

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<sup>42</sup> "Chuwölmuch'öp [Memorandum from the ROK Military Attaché to South Vietnam]," no. 65-01, February 1965, in *Wöllumgonghwaguk chiwönjünggangül wihan kukpangbu p'agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch'amgojaryo* [Result Report of the Staff Visits from Ministry of Defense to Support South Vietnam and Its Related Reference], vol. 2-1, HB02652.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Chae, *Pet'unamjönjaenggwa na*, 42-45.

Zedong's revolutionary strategy and Hanoi had legitimacy with the Vietnamese people.<sup>45</sup>

ROKA's research about the Vietnam War also presented a pessimistic view of winning the war with military forces and argued that the allies should approach this war with a more political than military perspective.<sup>46</sup>

The Koreans doubted winning the loyalty of people in this revolutionary war. The official report in 1964 by the Korean non-combat troops deployed to Vietnam described the South Vietnamese situation: “[South Vietnamese] people gave more credit to the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese government than to their own government.”<sup>47</sup> The Koreans knew that South Vietnamese were not very happy for their entering, as the Report of the Situation on South Vietnam by the ROK Embassy at Saigon on 19 February 1965, stated, “The South Vietnamese are sick of nineteen years of protracted civil war in Vietnam. They have no interest and are impassive on the news of our troops' deployment.”<sup>48</sup> This memorandum concluded that achieving a victory in this war would be impossible unless the U.S. made a drastic change in its conduct of the war. Moreover, the ROK Embassy determined that the South Vietnamese were not willing to fight, and even the military had low morale because of the political instability due to the senior officers' coup and interference in politics.<sup>49</sup>

Many of the Korean soldiers were surprised to see that many Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers respected the enemy leader Ho Chi Min. For the Koreans who went to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 57-58; Ibid., 172-176.

<sup>47</sup> “Wöllamsat'aeüi punsök [Analysis on the Vietnam Conflict],” August 1964, in *Wöllamgonghwaguk chiwönjünggangül wihan kukpangbu p'agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch'amgojaryo* [Result Report of the Staff Visits from Ministry of Defense to Support South Vietnam and Its Related Reference], vol. 1, HB02644.

<sup>48</sup> “Han'gukkun chüngp'a kyölichöngge ttarünün yöron [South Vietnam's Public Opinion Based on the Decision of Additional ROK Forces' Dispatch],” in *Wöllamgonghwaguk chiwönjünggangül wihan kukpangbu p'agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch'amgojaryo*, vol. 2-1, HB02652.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Vietnam, it was a big contradiction. Many of the politicians and officers in South Vietnam were corrupt, and corruption prevailed everywhere. In addition to bribery, South Vietnam was unstable due to the frequent replacement of the leaders by a coup. Later in 1967, Lt. Col. Ji Duk-keon defined the Vietnam War as a combination of military, political, and ideological conflict, arguing, “we cannot determine this war using military forces only because this war requires South Vietnamese support most.”<sup>50</sup> In addition to pursuing the national interest, the Koreans need a political approach toward this war.

As a result, Seoul and the ROK military had a dilemma in seeking national interests in an unwinnable war. While pursuing the benefits they could get from the United States, President Park thought, “It would be selfish to stress only benefits when the U.S. is facing a serious situation on the battlefield.”<sup>51</sup> How to maintain South Korea’s presence without domestic or international (mainly U.S.) backlash was a key. Therefore, Seoul, at first, did not want to project an image that South Korean forces went to Vietnam only for their own interests. Secondly, because of its pessimistic view on the war, Seoul should also consider the domestic public opinions, especially for President Park’s win in upcoming the election. Although the decision to participate in the war gave Park an advantage, it was also a political burden if participation did not go well. Accordingly, Seoul wanted their soldiers to fight well in Vietnam in order to raise South Korea’s national prestige while keeping its troop casualties down.

The first group of combat troops was organized as elite groups. Since the U.S. and the South Vietnamese government requested a division-sized unit, two regiments of the Capital Division and the 2d Marine Brigade (originally regiment) were selected as deployment forces.

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<sup>50</sup> Ji, “Wōllamjōnesōūi han'gukkun chōnsurūi t'adangsōng yōbu,” 1967, HB02032.

<sup>51</sup> Yi, *Taet'ongnyōngŭl kŭrimyō*, 109.

The Capital (Tiger) Division was a reserve division with a high reputation gained from the Korean War and the 2d Marine (Blue Dragon) Brigade was also an elite unit representing the Marine Corps. In August, President Park named General Chae the first commander of the ROKFV. In addition to his rich combat experience from guerilla operations during the Korean War, General Chae graduated from the U.S. Army Infantry Officer Advanced Course at Fort Benning in 1954 and the U.S. Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in 1964. ROK forces also selected many officers who understood the U.S. military and were able to communicate in English. Only the most prominent officers in the ROK Army and Marine Corps were allowed to become members of the first combat units sent to Vietnam. For instance, in the Capital Division, the selected battalion commanders all had Korean War experience, received education in U.S. military schools, and already served as battalion commanders.<sup>52</sup> Most of the junior officers, such as company commanders and platoon leaders, had graduated from the Korea Military Academy.<sup>53</sup> Later, General William Westmoreland, the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), observed, “since General Chae and other senior and many junior ROK officers spoke English, communication with Americans presented few problems.”<sup>54</sup> Koreans were well aware that having a close relationship with the U.S. forces would be necessary for conducting the Vietnam War.

The first combat group was organized to prepare for deployment based on a Ministry of Defense order on 28 August 1965.<sup>55</sup> How to recruit soldiers mattered after selecting the officer group. In the first group, most of the soldiers were volunteers chosen through a strict selection program. In the Capital Division, only 20% were original members of the division; the remaining

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<sup>52</sup> Choi, *Han'gwönūro ingnūn pe'ūnamjōnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, 102.

<sup>53</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 142.

<sup>54</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 257.

<sup>55</sup> *Chuwōl han'gukkun chi*, December 1967, HB02052.

80% were recruited from other divisions.<sup>56</sup> The 9th Company commander of the Tiger Division (in 1965-1966), Capt. Yong Yŏng-il, articulated the Korean soldiers' motivation for their participation:

The primary reason to fight was patriotism, but soldiers also considered going to Vietnam because it was profitable for them. Soldiers who decided to volunteer said that they would go to foreign countries. In South Korea, supplies were poor, and they had a harsh life in the military. If they went to Vietnam, it would be mentally more comfortable, and there would be a greater opportunity to earn money. When I asked the soldiers, they told me that as a young man, they would try going to a foreign country rather than eventually dying in such a small land.<sup>57</sup>

The soldiers' motivations for participating in the Vietnam War were mixed with a noble cause such as patriotism to protect their country and the economic benefits to make their living and support their family.<sup>58</sup> It is commonly known that the first group's troop morale was high because of their pride in being selected to represent the nation in the first dispatch of Korean history. However, being in the first group of the combat troop dispatch with no experience of real combat before, soldiers were also afraid of entering the war.

The ROKFV commander, Maj. Gen. Chae, worried about the groundless rumors concerning the unfamiliar battlefield of Vietnam flying around in the camp and therefore, "soldiers who wanted to avoid entering the Vietnam War jumped."<sup>59</sup> In the early days of the camp, he received a report that "about ten soldiers almost every day and over twenty when there

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<sup>56</sup> Choi, *Han'gwŏnŭro ingnŭn pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, 166.

<sup>57</sup> Yong Yŏng-il interview, 26 October 1966, Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 199.

<sup>58</sup> For more details about the Korean soldiers' motivations for their participation in the Vietnam War, see Chapter 7. Also, Eun Seo Jo argues that "an obligation to provide financial support for their impoverished families and a cult of militarized valor prompted young men to choose war as a way to fulfill their masculine roles." Eun Seo Jo, "Fighting for Peanuts: Reimagining South Korean Soldiers' Participation in the Wŏllam Boom," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21 (2014): 58-87.

<sup>59</sup> Chae, *Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa na*, 105-106.

were many, deserted.”<sup>60</sup> Addressing soldiers’ fear, Chae not only ordered the commanders but he himself came forward to lift the morale of soldiers. His speech, “Let’s challenge our fates. Don’t run away like a coward. People who will die can die anywhere; people who will survive can survive even in hell,” impressed the soldiers.<sup>61</sup> Since Chae survived many times during the Korean War, his remark was persuasive to the soldiers. One soldier wrote: “One day General Chae visited us and patted on the back and shook hands with every soldier. At that moment, the remarks that let’s go to Vietnam with him and soldiers who would return from Vietnam would not be killed even from the car accident in South Korea, encouraged me to high spirit.”<sup>62</sup>

Compared to ROK Marines who had already organized and prepared for the deployment in late August, the ROK Army (ROKA) Capital Division’s preparation was in haste.<sup>63</sup> They were trained for a month at a camp in Hong-cheon, where the division was situated. According to testimonies, pre-deployment education focused on marksmanship training for combat and tactical training, such as reconnaissance ambush, guerilla, and jungle warfare training, without having a systematic training and education system for the dispatch.<sup>64</sup> In addition, they educated soldiers with an overview of Vietnam. For the first group, since they were going to deploy as an entire organization, soldiers could train and learn with the same group they would fight with in Vietnam. The 3rd Battalion commander of the 1st Tiger Regiment, Lt. Col. Park Kyung-suk, said, “We did not use the field manual during a month and a half of training. Marksmanship and throwing a hand grenade were our main training. The six battalion commanders executed moral

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 109-113.

<sup>62</sup> Jo Yŏng-jo, “Maenghwa haebyŏngŭn yŏngwŏnhan hyŏngje [The Tiger and Marines are Eternal Brothers],” 172, in *To Tarŭn Shijak* [A New Start], ed. Federation of Artistic & Cultural Organization of Korea (Chuncheon: Kangwon Ilbosa, 2000), 172-180.

<sup>63</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Haebuyŏng che 2 yŏdan* [The 2nd Marine Brigade], HB02025.

<sup>64</sup> Park Kyung-suk, author’s interview, 2 June 2018, Interviewee’s home, Daejon, South Korea.

education to the soldiers based on their experience fighting during the Korean War.”<sup>65</sup> Since the Korean troops had to prepare for Vietnam in haste—only two months were allowed for troop organization (recruiting and selecting officers and soldiers), and train them to be ready to fight without the established system for the training—the first group had to focus on how to adjust to combat in a strange land Vietnam in a month.<sup>66</sup>

The most famous episode in the first group’s deployment training was the 10th Company Commander, Capt. Kang Jae-koo’s death during grenade throwing training. On 4 October 1965, when one private lost the safety pin and the grenade rolled toward company soldiers, Capt. Kang jumped to cover the grenade. He sacrificed himself to save the others. According to Maj. Seo Woo-in, operations officer in the 1st Tiger Regiment, Kang’s body was neglected because nobody knew what they should do. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Park Kyung-suk in the agreement with the U.S. advisor, recommended Kang as a hero to General Chae, and General Chae notified President Park of the incident.<sup>67</sup> The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Park, renamed the battalion Jae-koo, remembering Kang’s sacrifice. Capt. Kang became a hero in South Korea. All of the nation was impressed by his sacrifice and public support for the deploying troops peaked after this incident.<sup>68</sup> As a result, Capt. Kang’s sacrifice echoed throughout the camp and served as a turning point to change soldiers’ morale.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> After 1966, all officers and soldiers had to be trained and educated in Vietnam Dispatching Troops Training Center at Oheum-ri, Hwacheon for a month before going to Vietnam.

<sup>67</sup> Seo Woo-in, author’s interview; Park Kyung-suk, author’s interview; Chae, *Pet’ūnamjōnjaenggwa na*, 124.

<sup>68</sup> Since then Capt. Kang became the most famous hero not only in the Koreans’ participation in the Vietnam War but also in the South Korean modern military history. Ibid. “Changnyōrhan sanhwa [A Heroic Death],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 6 October 1965; “Kuninjōngshinūi kwigam [A Paragon of Military Spirit],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 8 October 1965.



Figure 1. The Statue of Kang Jae-koo.



Figure 2. Jae-koo Ceremony.

Annual “Jae-koo Ceremony” at the Korea Military Academy. The statue of Capt. (Maj.) Kang is at the center of the Korea Military Academy. Reprinted with permission from the Korea Military Academy at Seoul, South Korea.<sup>69</sup>

At the farewell ceremony in Yeouido at Seoul on 12 October 1965, over 200,000 people gathered to celebrate the soldiers.<sup>70</sup> Before the ceremony, according to General Chae, he allowed soldiers to meet their families for two days despite the ROKA order to cancel such plans.

Contrary to ROKA’s concern for deserters, there were no deserters during the visitation period.

At the Capital Division’s farewell ceremony at the port in Busan, over 100,000 people gathered to celebrate their soldiers. Their morale was high, indeed. In October, Korean combat troops arrived in Vietnam. The 2d Marine Brigade was dispatched from Korea to Vietnam on October 3 and the Capital Division moved from Korea to Vietnam between October 7 and 26.

<sup>69</sup> <https://kma.ac.kr/home.do?domain=eng.life.festival05>

<sup>70</sup> “Igigo toraora [Return Home after Winning],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 2 October 1965.



Figure 3. The Send-Off Ceremony for the Tiger Division, 12 October 1965. Reprinted with permission from the Collection of Government Record Photographs e-Motion Picture History Museum.<sup>71</sup>



Figure 4. Korean People's Gathering for the Farewell of the Replacement Troops in Busan Harbor, 22 July 1966. Reprinted with permission from the Collection of Government Record Photographs e-Motion Picture History Museum.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup>[http://ehistory.go.kr/page/view/photo.jsp?photo\\_PhotoSrcGBN=BK&detl\\_PhotoDTL=1756](http://ehistory.go.kr/page/view/photo.jsp?photo_PhotoSrcGBN=BK&detl_PhotoDTL=1756)

<sup>72</sup>[http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/view/photo.jsp?photo\\_PhotoSrcGBN=BK&photo\\_PhotoID=12&detl\\_PhotoDTL=1665&gbn=BK](http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/view/photo.jsp?photo_PhotoSrcGBN=BK&photo_PhotoID=12&detl_PhotoDTL=1665&gbn=BK)



Figure 5. The 9th (White Horse) Division Farewell Ceremony (26 August 1966) at Seoul, South Korea. Reprinted with permission from the Collection of Government Record Photographs e-Motion Picture History Museum.<sup>73</sup>



Figure 6. A Soldier's Meeting with his Family Before the Dispatch, 26 August 1966. Reprinted with permission from the Collection of Government Record Photographs e-Motion Picture History Museum.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup><http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/view/photo.jsp?photo PhotoSrcGBN=BK&photo PhotoID=12&detl PhotoDTL=1658&gbn=BK>

<sup>74</sup><http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/view/photo.jsp?photo PhotoSrcGBN=BK&photo PhotoID=12&detl PhotoDTL=1657&gbn=BK>

## **A Compromise Plan: ROKFV's Strategy for the Conduct of the Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War would be a war of attrition to pacify South Vietnam. The American policy for the Vietnam War was to contain South Vietnam by securing and stabilizing it against the Viet Cong insurgency and North Vietnam's invasion.<sup>75</sup> Since the allied ground forces were not allowed to invade North Vietnam in order not to provoke China's entrance into the war, their conduct was limited inside South Vietnam. Accordingly, the Vietnam War could only be ended by bending the will of North Vietnam and the VC to invade and subvert South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese government. The U.S. forces acknowledged that the Vietnam War was a revolutionary war for which winning public support was imperative for success in Vietnam. U.S. MACV stated, "The war in Vietnam is a political as well as a military war. It is political because the ultimate goal is to regain the loyalty and cooperation of the people, and to create conditions which permit the people to go about their normal lives in peace and security."<sup>76</sup> As a result, the pacification of South Vietnam was to be the allied forces' goal of the Vietnam War.

The war situation for the allies was bad before and after the ROK combat troops entered in late October 1965.<sup>77</sup> The U.S. forces recognized that "at the present time, large geographical areas of Vietnam are dominated by the VC."<sup>78</sup> The year 1965 would be a pivotal time for the allies' conduct of the Vietnam War. In March, the U.S. MACV commander, General William Westmoreland, "predicted that the next six months would be decisive, for the enemy was moving from guerrilla and small unit combat to a new phase of warfare featuring attacks by large units

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<sup>75</sup> For more details about the U.S.'s developing policy see: John M. Carland, *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2000); Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 239-240.

<sup>76</sup> MACV Directive 525-4, "Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam," 17 September 1965, Folder 3, Box 3, Larry Berman Collection, VNCA.

<sup>77</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 14-18.

<sup>78</sup> "Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam," VNCA.

that stood and fought when challenged.”<sup>79</sup> Based on Mao Zedong’s three phases of the revolutionary war—the first phase was to establish the base and foundation, the second was to expand the territory, and the third was to subvert the government—the North Vietnamese and VC were expected to prepare for transfer to the third phase.<sup>80</sup>

Since the United States and other allied ground troops arrived by piecemeal in Vietnam, General Westmoreland proposed the three-phase campaign strategy with the goal of “defeating the VC and facilitating GVN control over the country.”<sup>81</sup> It was “First, to halt the VC offensive—to stem the tide. Second, to resume the offensive—to destroy VC and pacify selected high priority areas. Third, to restore progressively the entire country to the control of the GVN.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, phase 1 was to stabilize the situation by the end of 1965; phase 2, starting from early 1966, was to shift into a sustained offensive; and phase 3 was to eliminate the remaining enemy forces.<sup>83</sup> As a member of the allied troops, the Korean combat troops followed this three-phase campaign plan. ROKFV established its goals when they arrived in South Vietnam:

Phase One: In the objective of securing key points to defend TAOR, deploy the troops and build the tactical base with patrol and reconnaissance around the base.

Phase Two: In the objective of establishing the foothold to offensive, stabilize TAOR by capturing the enemy area inside of TAOR with deep search and reconnaissance. Prepare to engage in offensive outside of TAOR.

Phase Three: Broaden TAOR. Develop a large-scale combat operation. Destroy the main enemy troops and support the ARVN’s pacification.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Ji, “Wöllamjonesöüi han'gukkun chönsurüi t'adangsöng yöbu,” 1967, HB02032.

<sup>81</sup> “Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam,” VNCA.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 68-69.

<sup>84</sup> Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol. 1-1 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1978), 265.

ROKFV planned to conduct the first phase by the end of 1965, the second phase in 1966, and the third phase after 1967. Therefore, in their early participation in the war, ROK forces focused on securing their assigned area by building bases; but rarely launched large-scale offensive operations. Their conduct was not simply based on their phased plan. ROKFV's strategy, the specific concept of operation, and tactics determined the ROK forces' actual conduct in the Vietnam War.

To pacify South Vietnam, American forces focused on destroying the VC instead of focusing on pacification operations. In pursuit of the three-phase campaign strategy, the U.S.'s forces were tasked primarily to conduct a large-scale offensive operation, "search and destroy." The USMACV designed a campaign plan that assigned the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) one mission and the U.S. and other allied forces including the South Koreans another mission.<sup>85</sup> The MACV wanted Americans and other allied forces, besides securing their territories, to conduct offensive operations outside the secure areas against the VC and North Vietnamese, while South Vietnamese units focused on pacification by concentrating on defending, clearing, and securing the designated areas.<sup>86</sup>

At the operational level, General Westmoreland developed three types of military operations for conducting the Vietnam War: search and destroy, clear, and secure. The first part was a search and destroy operation: finding, fixing, fighting, and destroying enemy forces, their base areas, and supply caches. This was followed by a clearing operation intended to drive the VC main force units out of populated areas so that pacification efforts could proceed. After that,

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<sup>85</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 186-188; George L. MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1998), 7-8.

<sup>86</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 152.

a securing operation would eliminate local guerrillas and enemy political infrastructure in areas undergoing pacification.<sup>87</sup> Among these, the first phase of search and destroy—nothing more than the infantry’s traditional attack mission—became the essential operational and tactical strategy for the American conduct of war. As the number of American troops in Vietnam increased, Westmoreland adapted the operational stages. American forces assumed the search and destroy operations, while ARVN troops were relegated to the clearing and securing operations.<sup>88</sup>

This might have been a sound yet wishful plan to pacify South Vietnam from the perspective of efficient or effective use of military power. By conducting search and destroy operations, American forces could maximize their overwhelming firepower and mobility to destroy the bulk of VC or North Vietnamese regular forces. Westmoreland believed this fit with the aggressive spirit of the U.S. Army and was a logical response to the VC dominating South Vietnam in conjunction with the direct threat from North Vietnam.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, South Vietnamese soldiers were much better suited to the pacification operations especially in the control of population than other countries’ forces, because they “understood the language, customs, problems, and aspirations of the Vietnamese people—for they were part of this people.”<sup>90</sup> As a result, search and destroy became the American fixed conventional war concept of operations to destroy the enemy’s regular and guerrilla forces in Vietnam.

Based on this objective, the U.S. forces wanted to employ ROK combat troops to fight like American troops by putting them under operational control (OPCON). However, the Korean

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<sup>87</sup> Ulysses S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), 91; Lewis, *The American Culture of War*, 256.

<sup>88</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 51.df

<sup>89</sup> John Pimlott, *Vietnam: The History and the Tactics* (New York: Crescent Book, 1982), 80.

<sup>90</sup> Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam*, 132.

forces strongly resisted the U.S. forces' OPCON and requested an equal cooperative relationship. The U.S. forces' failure to build a combined command with South Vietnamese forces was a good cause for South Koreans to avoid American operational control.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, rather than merely following the American way of fighting, the Koreans sought to establish their own approach to the Vietnam War. One ROKFV document stated that an establishment of the ROKFV's "new" strategy for the Vietnam War was decided by many factors: "analysis of the Vietnam War including understanding the strategy and tactics of North Vietnam and Vietcong, allies' military goal, and ROK's own interest."<sup>92</sup>

As a result, ROKFV set its main strategic goal: to pacify and secure their tactical area of responsibility (TAOR).<sup>93</sup> The Korean combat forces shared the U.S. forces' judgment of the current situation that 1965 introduced North Vietnam and VC's second phase of the war. However, while the U.S. intended to thwart the enemy forces' revolutionary scheme by directly destroying the VC, General Chae thought ROKFV should counteract the enemy's phased plan. He called this concept a "spreading oil spot" pacification strategy.<sup>94</sup> Since the enemy was focusing on the expansion of control areas by establishing relationships with local populations before preparing an all-out offensive, Chae decided to secure and hold the assigned area in order to cut off any relationship between the VC and South Vietnamese people instead of destroying

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<sup>91</sup> For more details, see Chapter 2.

<sup>92</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Chuwöl han'gukkun chi*, HB02052.

<sup>93</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Wöllamjönesöüi han'gukkun chönsul* [Tactics of the ROK Forces in the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, 1969), 109.

<sup>94</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], "Kunsajögin kyönjiesöüi wöllamjön chölllyak [The Strategy of the Vietnam War in the Military Perspective]," 30 December 1968, HB02331.

the VC with any single major operation. By doing this, ROK forces aimed to delay and deter the enemy from moving to the third phase.<sup>95</sup>

In fact, ROKFV's pacification strategy was more like their compromise to cope with the dilemma weighing on them. The Korean forces were in a more politically oriented position facing their dilemma on concluding their conduct of the Vietnam War. A ROKFV chronicle in 1967 wrote:

General Chae made a circumspect and earnest resolution that the success of our troop participation in the Vietnam War depended solely on him, the commander of ROKFV. Chae knew that the Korean forces in Vietnam, deployed abroad for the first time in our history, should accomplish the mission and assignment given from the nation—even in this difficult and unique situation of the Vietnam War, which would make it impossible to achieve a victory with the usual strategy and tactics. Furthermore, ROKFV's performance in Vietnam has been too important to the entire ROK forces' honor and our country's prestige.<sup>96</sup>

As this remark suggested, the ROK troops had to fight well to improve the international prestige of South Korea who sent a significant number of combat troops to Vietnam as the U.S. and South Vietnam's coalition ally. Moreover, ROKFV knew that having a close relationship with the U.S. forces was essential since they depended on the U.S. forces' support in their overall conduct of operations in Vietnam. At the same time, Seoul's internal goal to pursue their national interests through participation in a "hopeless war" imposed a heavy burden on the Korean forces. South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War was regarded as a historical deployment to achieve South Korea's national interests in addition to President Park's political decision for a

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<sup>95</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Wöllamjön chonghap yön'gu* [Comprehensive Research on the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, 1974), 379-390; Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, "Kunsajögin kyönjiesöüi wöllamjön chölllyak," HB02331.

<sup>96</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Chuwöl han'gukkun chi*, HB02052.

long-term seizure of power. Therefore, following Seoul's dictate to keep the casualties down, ROKFV should be prudent in conducting the war in order not to place the political burden on President Park.

Maj. Gen. Chae Myung-shin, the commander of ROKFV and the Tiger Division, was well aware of this dilemma, and fortunately for Seoul, he was politically astute enough not only to understand but also to be able to handle this dilemma. He received a great deal of leeway for military operations in Vietnam from the ROK government when he was assigned as the ROKFV commander.<sup>97</sup> Thus, it is true that substantial parts of the ROK's conduct in the Vietnam War rested on Chae's ideas. Chae made an effort to settle this complex situation by seeking the Korean national interests at the same time, saving face by contributing to the war effort. Chae perceived the war in Vietnam as hopeless (pessimistic about the war), saying, "we will never win the Vietnam War."<sup>98</sup> However, he said, "Once we started to participate in the war, I decided to do my best to achieve the national interest of the ROK instead of winning in a battle."<sup>99</sup> Chae believed that the Korean troops could and should conduct the war in accordance with South Korean interests, by avoiding the U.S. forces' direct OPCON over the Korean forces in Vietnam and establishing a cooperative relationship with American forces. At the same time, the Korean forces could raise their national prestige by being regarded as an autonomous and capable presence in the Vietnam Conflict, if their "unique" efforts delivered the outcome corresponding to the allied forces' goal.

After setting a strategy as a pacification, ROKFV should specify its operational concept and tactics for its conduct in the Vietnam War. In the execution phase, ROKFV's pacification

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<sup>97</sup> Chae, *Pet'ūnamjōnjaenggwa na*, 53-56.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

strategy could be divided into the three operational parts: “to separate [the people from the Viet Cong], destroy [the isolated or neutralized Viet Cong], and expand [the pacified territory].”<sup>100</sup>

The first and foremost element was “to separate people from the guerilla and to neutralize the guerilla by isolating and cutting them off from their relationship with the people.”<sup>101</sup> Chae agreed with Mao Zedong’s analogy, “the guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the water.”<sup>102</sup> As fish cannot live without water, he believed separating the Vietnamese people from the VC should be the priority of the ROK pacification strategy.<sup>103</sup> As a result, ROKFV addressed the separation of guerrillas from civilians rather than finding and killing guerillas directly.<sup>104</sup>

The second and third elements followed the success of the first priority. The second component, “to destroy the isolated and neutralized enemy,” was related to mainly using conventional military power to destroy the VC who were already isolated by their separation from civilians.<sup>105</sup> Typically, “destroy” operations should be preceded by separation and isolation of VC; however, the ROK’s destroy concept differed from the U.S. search and destroy concept. “Destroy” was not the first priority in the ROK’s operational strategy. Even in this kind of offensive combat operation, commanders were required to be prudent in launching an operation based on the guideline of achieving maximum results with minimum casualties. The third element, “to expand the [pacified] territory,” was started after securing the current territory.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 282; Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjonesöüi han’gukkun chönsul*, 7; Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, “Kunsajögin kyönjiesöüi wöllamjön chölllyak,” HB02331.

<sup>101</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 380; Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjonesöüi han’gukkun chönsul*, 7.

<sup>102</sup> Alexander C. Cook, *Mao’s Little Red Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 193; Chae, *Pet’ünamjönjaenggwa na*, 178.

<sup>103</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Chüngönül t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 122.

<sup>104</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 1-1, 265; Chae, *Pet’ünamjönjaenggwa na*, 191.

<sup>105</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 382; Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjonesöüi han’gukkun chönsul*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 382; *Wöllamjonesöüi han’gukkun chönsul*, 7-8.

The ROKFV should secure the territory, “by offering the maximum support to people, cooperating with ARVN, South Vietnamese Regional Forces (RF), Popular Forces (PF), and Revolutionary Development (RD), and conducting continuous reconnaissance and ambush operations.”<sup>107</sup> When the assigned territory became secured and stabilized, then “ROKFV should turn it over to the South Vietnamese governmental authority while continuing to expand its territory for the pacification.” In this way, ROK forces expanded pacified areas.

To conduct its pacification operations, ROKFV used the two operational methods: one a “combat operation” and the other a “civil affairs operation.”<sup>108</sup> The Koreans used these two options separately, but repeatedly used both as a single operation as demonstrated in the representative case of Operation *Ojakgyo* in early 1967.<sup>109</sup> The ratio of these two different types of operations was not fixed in the ROKFV’s conduct in the Vietnam War. In fact, rather than an equal balance between the two operations, the ratio was flexible depending on the military and political situation at that time. According to the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (G-3) of ROKFV, Col. Han Min-seok, ROK forces conducted both combat and civil affairs operations on a 50:50 ratio initially, but shifted to 30:70 in 1968 and then 10:90 in 1969 before General Chae left Vietnam.<sup>110</sup>

Korean combat operations fell into two categories: small-scale (below company level) and large-scale (above battalion level) operation. A large-scale combat operation was especially relevant with the second element of the pacification strategy to destroy the enemy troops, while overall combat operations could be applied to the pacification operations. *The Introduction of*

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 7-8.

<sup>108</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, *Chuwŏl han’gukkun chi*, HB02052.

<sup>109</sup> For more details, see Chapter 4.

<sup>110</sup> Han Min-sŏk interview, August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 126-127.

*ROKFV* stated, “the combat operation should focus on destroying the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.”<sup>111</sup> General Chae emphasized, “the combat operation should achieve the maximum benefits with minimum casualties. *ROKFV* has to build a specific plan and spare enough time for preparation before launching the operation.”<sup>112</sup> Therefore, among many types of combat operations, the enveloping operation by “using superior troops, fire, and quick maneuver at the favorable time and position,” was regarded as the most preferred and efficient option to destroy enemy forces.<sup>113</sup> Meanwhile, small-scale combat operations dominated the *ROKFV*’s overall operations in the Vietnam War (see Table 1) mainly because small-scale combat operations were used in every part of *ROKFV*’s pacification strategy.

Table 1. *ROKFV*’s Combat Operations

<i>Year</i>	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	<i>total</i>
<i>Small-Scale</i>	2,206	38,722	73,448	96,907	89,002	102,248	130,294	40,831	562,208
<i>Large-Scale</i>	15	63	97	170	216	302	258	58	1,179
<i>Total</i>	2,221	38,785	97,077	89,218	102,550	130,552	130,552	40,439	563,387

Source: Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu [Headquarters of *ROKFV*], *Wŏllamjŏn chonghap yŏn’gu* [Research on the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, 1974), 391.

Civil affairs operations focused on how to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. The *ROKFV* argued, “to protect people and have the support of people are equally important with destroying the enemy.”<sup>114</sup> Civil affairs operations were regarded as the most important in their initial phase of the pacification strategy, namely separating VC from civilians. More specifically by virtue of the civil affairs operations, Korean forces should “protect the lives

<sup>111</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu [Headquarters of *ROKFV*], *Chuwŏlgun sogae* [The Introduction of *ROKFV*] (Saigon: Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, 1967), ch.2, 2.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, *Wŏllamjŏnesŏui han’gukkun chŏnsul*, 23.

<sup>114</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, *Chuwŏlgun sogae*, ch.2, 2.

and assets of the people, executing aid and support for civilians, conducting psychological warfare, strengthening the relationship between the Koreans and Vietnamese, and cutting off the relationship with civilians and Viet Cong.”<sup>115</sup> At first, about 2,000 *Dove* noncombat units—including construction, medics, and instructors of Taekwondo units—were specially tasked for civil affairs operations.<sup>116</sup> Additionally, the ROKFV, two army divisions, and Marine Brigade had an independent staff function for civil affairs operations; the civil affairs chief in the ROKFV headquarters was a colonel. The S-2 (intelligence) officer was in charge of the civil affairs operation in the regimental- and battalion-level operations.<sup>117</sup> For technical tasks, ROKFV directly operated a civil affairs company composed of 27 officers and 95 enlisted soldiers.<sup>118</sup>

Foremost, each rifle infantry company was required to execute not only its combat missions but also civil affairs missions based on the ROKFV’s guideline for “all soldiers to become a civil affairs operation agent.”<sup>119</sup> Compared to other allied troops’ civil affairs operations, which separated the civil affairs mission from combat operations, this guideline suggested the uniqueness of the ROK operations. Since ROK combat forces were required to execute both combat as well as civic action missions, both became a mission task for every ROKFV unit, at least in principle. It is uncertain whether this mindset, together with the slogan of “protecting one civilian even if you miss one hundred Viet Cong,” was well embraced by all Korean soldiers or served simply as a political slogan. Nevertheless, it may have become a more

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. For more details about ROKFV’s civil-affair operations, see Chapter 5.

<sup>116</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 1-1, 193.

<sup>117</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 936.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 853-960.

<sup>119</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Chuwölgun sogae*, ch.3, 3.

basic mindset for the Korean soldiers that sympathizing with the heart and mind of the Vietnamese people was the essential characteristic of their Vietnam participation.<sup>120</sup>

In conclusion, ROKFV's pacification strategy was not a purely military based decision but was more on a political consideration reflecting the condition of the war. Facing the dilemma, Chae set ROKFV's "internal" goal: "to gain a maximum benefit with minimum sacrifice."<sup>121</sup> The S-3 (Operations) officer of the ROKFV headquarters, Lt. Col. Kim Sun-hyŏn, explained Chae's guideline: "The objective of fighting here is for the benefit of [Korea]. Officers shouldn't make your soldiers die here."<sup>122</sup> Chae thought, "establishing a new strategy and tactic is required" in order to achieve ROKFV's internal goal.<sup>123</sup> In this regard, the pacification strategy—that put more effort into supporting South Vietnamese authorities in the region rather than directly destroying the VC with conventional operations—could minimize the ROK sacrifices. Moreover, these pacification efforts were in accord with the allies' overall and ultimate military goal to stabilize and pacify South Vietnam. Thus, setting their strategy to focus on pacification operations corresponded to both the Korean forces' internal goal as well as the strategic goal for the Vietnam War.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 2-3. For more details about the Korean pacification and civil affairs operations, see Chapter 5.

<sup>121</sup> Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu, *Chuwŏl han'gukkun chi*, HB02052; Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu, *Chuwŏlgun sogae*, ch.2, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Kim Sun-hyŏn interview, 4 February 1970, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 137.

<sup>123</sup> Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu, *Chuwŏl han'gukkun chi*, HB02052.

## Chapter 2

### “Politics by Other Means”: ROK Forces’ Establishment of the Relationship with U.S. forces in the Vietnam War

#### “It Is a Big Deal”: The Operational Control of the ROK Forces in the Vietnam War

From the beginning of their dispatch to Vietnam, ROK forces were in a supposed position of subordination to the U.S. forces in Vietnam, in which the Americans were expected to take operational control (OPCON) over Korean combat troops. In Vietnam, General Westmoreland had already exercised actual OPCON over the ROK noncombatant troops which were dispatched in mid-1964 through the Free World Military Assistance Policy Council (FWMAPC)—where the Chief of Joint General Staff of the South Vietnamese Army, the senior officer in Vietnam, and the Commander of MACV met regularly.<sup>1</sup> Westmoreland had already planned how to use Korean combat troops. In his memorandum to Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, United States Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Westmoreland noted: “Due to ethnic lingual and historical differences between Koreans and Vietnamese it is not envisioned that Korean combat forces will initially be assigned missions other than area security and combat support under US national operational control.”<sup>2</sup> Westmoreland wished, “[ROK] marine regiment combat team [to arrive] as soon as possible,” and planned, “to use it different location from rest of ROK division.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Pogo che 12 ho [The 12th Memorandum],” 25 January 1965, in *Wöllamgonghwaguk chiwönjüנגgangül wihan kukpangbu p’agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyöñjip’agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch’amgojaryo* [Result Report of the Staff Visits from Ministry of Defense to Support South Vietnam and Its Related Reference], vol. 1, 8 January 1965-15 February 1965, HB02649. In this memorandum from the chief of the noncombat troop to the Minister of Defense, Lee Hoon-sup stated, “[I] secretly consulted with the chief of staff of MACV to put [non-combat] troops’ actual operational control to the U.S. forces in Vietnam.”

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum from General Westmoreland to Admiral Sharp, 22 February 1965, Reel 4, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>3</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, “ROK Troops to Vietnam,” 14 June 1965, FRUS, Document 55.

The U.S. Army expected Koreans to fight like Americans. In its perspective, Korean soldiers were prepared to fight like American soldiers did, as General Westmoreland noted, “[Koreans] tended to do everything exactly as the U.S. Army field manuals spell it out.”<sup>4</sup> One of the distinctive characteristics of Korean forces was that they were an image of U.S. troops. South Korean forces had been created in the American style from their inception in 1948 and had been primarily trained and educated by the U.S. military doctrine, equipment, and weapons. That is why U.S. forces expected ROK forces in Vietnam to fight as well as the U.S. forces, and they wanted to put Koreans into their command and control system. Meanwhile, Koreans did not regard U.S. forces’ exercising OPCON over ROK combat troops as a serious matter before discussing their actual dispatch. When General Westmoreland met President Park in Seoul in the fall of 1964, he was told that the Korean combat troops would be under his command.<sup>5</sup> Park thought that it would be tolerable if Korean forces were under the U.S. forces’ operational control in Vietnam, as ROK forces in South Korea.<sup>6</sup> The South Korean Army senior officers’ point of view on command and control issues of ROK combat forces in Vietnam was not different from U.S. generals. According to Maj. Gen. Son Hŭi-sŏn, assistant chief of staff for operations (G-3) of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, many ROK senior officers assumed that Korean combat units in Vietnam would be under U.S. operational control since the whole of the ROK forces were already under that system.<sup>7</sup>

As soon as Seoul decided to send the combat troops to Vietnam, the U.S. unilaterally specified how to employ and operate the Korean troops. A memorandum on 9 July from the

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<sup>4</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 257.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>6</sup> Chae Myung-shin, *Pet’ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa na* [The Vietnam War and I] (Seoul: P’albogwŏn, 2006), 53-54.

<sup>7</sup> Son Hŭi-sŏn interview, 29 March 2001. Kukpangbu kunsap’yŏnch’anyŏn’guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], vol. 1 (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap’yŏnch’anyŏn’guso, 2001), 34.

commander of U.S. forces in Korea, General Dwight E. Beach, to the ROK Minister of Defense, Kim Sung-eun, notified that ROK combat forces in Vietnam would be under U.S. forces' OPCON when he stipulated provisional ROK combat forces' mission, deployment places, and logistics.<sup>8</sup> After receiving the memorandum from General Beach, Minister Kim voiced his opinion that Korean combat troops in Vietnam should not be under U.S. forces' direct OPCON at the meeting with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jang Chang-guk, and the Army Chief of Staff, General Kim Yong-bae. According to his memoir, Minister Kim argued against General Jang who favored giving OPCON to U.S. forces for the effectiveness of operations, "if the U.S. forces have a command and control over our forces, we might be operating in dangerous places. The huge sacrifice of our soldiers can turn the domestic public opinion against the war, which eventually will be a tremendous blow to our government."<sup>9</sup> Kim at least recognized that ROKFV under U.S. forces direct OPCON would be undesirable for them, and later built a bond of sympathy with President Park and ROKFV Commander Chae on this issue.<sup>10</sup>

In the following U.S.-ROK forces joint meeting at Seoul on 12 July for the advance preparation of combat troops dispatch, the U.S. and ROK military delegates could not reach an agreement in the command and control of ROKFV issue. Col. Langston reported that General Westmoreland wanted OPCON over ROK combat forces in Vietnam. ROK Maj. Gen. Son Hui-sŏn answered, "Personally, it is fine for me that ROK units will be under the U.S. operational control for the military purpose. But without prior consultation with South Vietnam, it does not

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<sup>8</sup> "Memorandum from Commander of the United States Forces Korea to Minister of Defense, 9 September 1965," in Kukpangbu [Ministry of National Defense], *Chŏnt'usadan p'awŏl hyŏpchŏngmun* [The Agreement of Dispatching Combat Division in Vietnam], 1965, HB02626.

<sup>9</sup> Kim Sung-eun, *Naŭi chani nŏmch'inaida* [My Glass is Running Over] (Seoul: Itempo Korea, 2008), 703-704

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 707.

justify our participation which is formally by the request of the South Vietnamese government.”<sup>11</sup> Further, the Korean side suggested building a combined command consisting of all allied forces. Lt. Col. McDonald replied, “In this place, we are considering only the military aspect. Building a combined command in South Vietnam looks difficult because South Vietnamese do not want it.”<sup>12</sup> On 8 July, after a year-long negotiation, the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces agreed to build a parallel command based on coordination and a cooperative relationship instead of establishing a combined command.<sup>13</sup> South Vietnamese military’s resistance to the combined command and legitimacy of the war related to colonialism were central to this negotiation; however, that was not applied to other allied forces. The Australian and New Zealand combat troops who were dispatched earlier than Korean combat troops came under the U.S. MACV’s operational control.<sup>14</sup> This all-day meeting concluded without a result.

On 17 July, the ROK Ministry of Defense organized its position on the operational control issue that ROKFV should be under the operational control of the combined command in Vietnam. The Korean military argued that this way could achieve the unity of command in the war effort while also maintaining the prestige of South Korea. The other two options they considered were to either be under the control of the International Military Assistance (IMA) or U.S. MACV.<sup>15</sup> Their decision to put ROKFV under the OPCON of the combined command was

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<sup>11</sup> “Hanmiyönsök'oeüi hoeüirok [Minutes of the U.S.-ROK Forces Joint Meeting],” 12 July 1965, in *Wöllamgonghwaguk chönt'ubudae p'abyöngül wihan kukpangbu p'agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch'amgojaryo* [Result Report of the Staff Visits from Ministry of Defense to Dispatch Combat troops to South Vietnam and Its Related Reference], vol. 1, August 1965- September 1965, HB02646.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “U.S.-GVN Relations: June 1963-1967,” vol.2, 4, in Pentagon Papers (Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force), National Archives. <https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/research/pentagon-papers/Pentagon-Papers-Part-IV-C-9b.pdf> (accessed 5 January 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 14; George S. Eckhardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control 1950-1969* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Kukpangbu [Ministry of National Defense], “Chuwöl han'gukkun chihwigwön kwan'gye yön'gu [Research on the Command and Control Relationship of ROKFV],” 17 June 1965, in *Chönt'usadan p'awöl hyöpchöngmun*, 1965, HB02626.

regarded as the most preferred option. Based on “the assumption that the Vietnam War would eventually turn into a conventional war as more U.S. troops were deployed in Vietnam,” thus building combined command would be desirable.<sup>16</sup> Although they did not intend to be under the U.S. forces’ direct OPCON in the Vietnam War for the purpose of maintaining South Korea’s national prestige, their decision to be under the combined command could suggest that the ROK military was not either confident of exercising the independent OPCON. Otherwise, the ROK military might intentionally keep claiming to establish a combined command with the intention of avoiding the U.S. direct OPCON. Since they knew to build a combined command in Vietnam was uncertain and impossible—U.S. and South Vietnamese forces decided to build a parallel command in early July, and South Koreans had already known this compromise to build a combined command would be impossible based on a chief of the noncombat Dove units, Brig. Gen. Lee Hoon-sup’s report to the ROK military on 15 January 1965—their decision might be a scheme to give a plausible excuse to avoid the direct U.S. OPCON.<sup>17</sup> Since the U.S. forces wanted to put the Korean combat troops under their OPCON; as a result, this agenda remained an unsolved issue between the U.S. and Korean forces.

According to his memoir, it was General Chae who convinced President Park that ROKFV should at least avoid the U.S. direct OPCON to pursue South Korea’s own interest in this war at the meeting with Park when he was appointed the commander of ROKFV in August.<sup>18</sup> Chae’s logic was similar to Defense Minister Kim that if the ROKFV caused lots of casualties due to being operated by the U.S. forces based on the U.S. OPCON, the Korean public would turn against their participation and it would become a political burden for Park regime. He

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “Pogo che 6 ho,” 15 January 1965, HB02649.

<sup>18</sup> Chae, *Pet’ūnamjōnjaenggwa na*, 54-55.

also pointed out avoiding U.S. OPCON would be important to overcome the American mercenary controversy of the Korean forces to be dispatched in South Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> President Park was aware of this issue as politically important more than anyone else in the cabinet. Therefore, Park agreed, and Defense Minister Kim endorsed General Chae.<sup>20</sup>

As discussed in the early chapter, South Korean policymakers were aware of the Vietnam War as problematic and difficult to achieve a victory, and the Koreans' participation was based on pursuing their own national interest. Therefore, General Chae as a field commander, was in a "strategic dilemma." Chae understood that South Korea's participation in the war was crucial for its national interests. Moreover, Chae, as a subordinate of President Park, had to keep the guideline from the President to keep Korean casualties low in this uncertain war.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the national interests would be from a close relationship with the United States. ROKFV at least should fight well and contribute to the war effort to avoid the criticism that they were selfish. In Chae's opinion, if the Korean forces fought well, then their national prestige would be enhanced among other allied countries.<sup>22</sup> Thus, to solve this dilemma, he set ROKFV's strategy focusing more on pacification; and to achieve his objective, Chae wanted to avoid the U.S. direct OPCON. Chae went further to claim that he should exercise OPCON for ROKFV. Fortunately for Seoul, Chae was a general who knew politics and good at it.

Before Korean combat troops' arrival, between 16 August and 6 September 1965, the ROK delegation—consisting of six generals, two interpreter officers, and one U.S. advisor—went to Vietnam to negotiate the working arrangement with U.S. MACV.<sup>23</sup> Before the departure,

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<sup>19</sup> Park Kyung-suk, *Chŏnjaengyŏngung ch'aemyŏngshin changgun* [A War Hero General Chae] (Seoul: P'albogwŏn, 2018), 224.

<sup>20</sup> Kim, *Naüi chani nŏmch'inaida*, 709.

<sup>21</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 257.

<sup>22</sup> Chae, *Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa na*, 176.

<sup>23</sup> Lee Se-ho, *Han'gillo sŏmgyŏttŏn nae choguk* [The nation I served] (Seoul: Taeyangmido, 2009), 322.

the delegation received the guideline from the Ministry of Defense to avoid the direct operation control by the U.S. forces over ROKFV, which had changed since July.<sup>24</sup> During this negotiation, they agreed on ROK forces' tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) and their mission to pacify their TAOR. The Capital Division would deploy in almost 1000 square kilometers of the Qui Nhon area, and the 2d Marine Brigade would be in the Cam Ranh area. Both areas belonged to the II Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) and fell under the U.S. I Field Force's area of responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Maj. Gen. Larsen (Lt. Gen. in 1967) explained that tactical conditions were primarily considered in deciding the ROK forces' deployment location.<sup>26</sup> Militarily, the highlands in CTZ II were not yet pacified and needed more troops, and geography allowed troops to spread out their command post easily.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this area was relatively safe compared to the North Vietnamese and Cambodian borderline, where the North Vietnamese regular troop's threat had always resided and Westmoreland had planned to deploy Korean troops initially.<sup>28</sup> Also, against their contention of establishing ROKFV's headquarters in Saigon as a representative of South Korea, they were told that "while his main command post would be with the Division, he may wish to establish a liaison group in Saigon."<sup>29</sup> Eventually, the

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<sup>24</sup> Kukpangbu [Ministry of National Defense], "Hanmi mit hanwölgan kunsashilmujayakchöngge issösö p'awöryöllak changgyodanjangege chunün chich'im [A Guideline for the Chief of the Delegate with regards to the Military Agreement with the U.S. and South Vietnamese Forces]," 22 July 1965, in *Wöllumgonghwaguk chönt'ubudae p'abyöngül wihan kukpangbu p'agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch'amgojaryo*, vol. 1, HB02646.

<sup>25</sup> "Subject for Discussion Relative to the Dispatching of ROKAF-V, 20 August 1965, in P'awöryöllaktan [Delegate to South Vietnam], *Han'gukkun wöllumjüngp'arül wihan hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo*, HB02655.

<sup>26</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 130.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*; "Han'gukkun chönt'usadan immu mit chudun wich'i [The Mission and Deployment of ROK Combat Forces]," in Kukpangbu [Ministry of National Defense], *Chönt'usadan p'awöl hyöpchöngmun* [The Agreement of Dispatching Combat Division in Vietnam], HB02626.

<sup>28</sup> Memorandum from Westmoreland to Sharp, 22 February 1965, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

establishment of ROK headquarters in Saigon with about 230 personnel was negotiated, even though South Korea initially requested 400 personnel.<sup>30</sup>

However, the two sides had difficulties compromising on the OPCON issue, as Westmoreland noted the “friction was beginning to develop after many unproductive sessions.”<sup>31</sup> At the first meeting with the MACV officials, the Korean delegate was told that General Westmoreland would exercise operational control over ROKFV and I Field Force commander Maj. Gen. Larsen would have OPCON over the Korean division and Marine brigade in the field.<sup>32</sup> After a long negotiation, the two sides reached an agreement on 6 September, the last day of the ROK delegation’s visit to South Vietnam. The signed military working arrangement between Maj. Gen. William B. Rosson, Chief of Staff of U.S. MACV and Maj. Gen. Lee Se-ho, chief of the delegation, stated the “command of the Republic of Korea Armed Forces in Vietnam will be vested in the Commander of the Republic of Korea Forces Vietnam (COMROKFV), designated by the Government of the Republic of Korea.”<sup>33</sup> It also stipulates that “International Military Assistance Policy Council (IMAPC) ... consist of the Chief of the Joint General Staff, RVNAF [South Vietnam] (Chairman), COMUSMACV, and COMROKFV ... to establish policy concerning missions and operational areas.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> P'awöryöllaktan [Delegate to South Vietnam], *Han'gukkun wöllamjüngp'arül wihan hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo* [The Result Report of the Delegate for Dispatch of the ROK Troops], 15 September 1965, HB02655.

<sup>31</sup> General Westmoreland’s Historical Briefing, 5 September 1965, Reel 5, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>32</sup> U.S. MACV Memorandum for Record, “ROK-US Planning Conference, 1000 hours, 23 August 1965,” 23 August 1965 in *Wöllamgonghwaguk chönt'ubudae p'abyöngül wihan kukpangbu p'agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch'amgojaryo* [Result Report of the Staff Visits from Ministry of Defense to Dispatch Combat troops to South Vietnam and Its Related Reference], vol. 2-1, August 1965-September 1965, HB02647; “Hanmiyönsök'oeüi hoeüirok [Minutes of the U.S.-ROK Forces Joint Meeting],” 12 July 1965, in *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Military Working Arrangement Between COMROKFV and COMUSMACV, Box 8, Security Classified General Records, RG 472, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) II, College Park, MD.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Although this arrangement stipulated that ROKFV would be under command of the Korean commander, the OPCON issue of ROKFV was not still clearly settled. General Larsen noted that there was no direct statement of the status of operational control over Korean combat troops in this arrangement.<sup>35</sup> General Westmoreland added “the detailed discussions with the ROK’s at staff level had failed to produce an agreement in the matter of command and control relationships... I believe that my discussion with Maj. Gen. Lee, chief of the delegation, was extremely timely and served to offset what could have been a serious problem.”<sup>36</sup> Westmoreland still expected that he would actually have OPCON over Korean combat troops. In contrast, in his memoir, General Lee Se-ho complimented the delegation for achieving the South Korean forces’ independent operational control.<sup>37</sup> Since the Korean military used the operational command and control in the same sense, the ROK delegation might have understood “command” to include operational command (control).<sup>38</sup> Also, the delegation understood that establishing the council (IMAPC) meant at least Korean units would not be under direct U.S. operational control, which they had received as one of the desirable options from the Ministry of Defense.

At the meeting on 4 September, two days before the agreement, Brig. Gen. Richard Sargent Abbey asked ROK Brig. Gen. Lee Hoon-sup whether the South Korean Army had the

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<sup>35</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 133-134.

<sup>36</sup> General Westmoreland’s Historical Briefing, 5 September 1965, VNCA.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, *Han'gillo sŏmgyŏttŏn nae choguk*, 334-341.

<sup>38</sup> The definition of command is “the authority that a commander in the armed forces lawfully exercises over subordinates by virtue of rank or assignment.” The difference between “command” and “operational command (control)” is that operational command is limited command authority to accomplish the mission of the operation. It is a narrower definition than command. Now the U.S. doctrine uses the term “combatant command (command authority)” similar to operational control but more specific than command. *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, s.v. “Command,” 41. <http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf?ver=2017-12-23-160155-320> (accessed 5 January 2018); *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, s.v. “Combatant Command (command authority),” 41. <http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf?ver=2017-12-23-160155-320> (accessed 5 January 2018); Joint Chief of Staff Document No. 912-758, “Chihwigwŏn kwan'gye suribe p'iryohan kunsasurŏe taehan haesŏk [Interpretation of the Military Term for the establishment of the Command Relationship],” 2 August 1965, in *Hanwŏl, hanmi kunsashilmuyakchŏng* [Documents about the Agreement of ROK-RVN, ROK-US Military], HB02795.

capability of conducting independent operation when they discussed the OPCON issue. Lee answered, “Koreans do not come to Vietnam to fight alone, and we can’t fight alone. I believe that you are not intended to say U.S. forces are not going to support us if we were not under your operational control.”<sup>39</sup> Besides, Lee suggested the two forces did not have to decide who was going to have the OPCON at that moment but should decide on different operational conditions after Korean combat troops arrived.<sup>40</sup> Lee noted in his memoir, “the formal statement was based on the expectation that the two sides could solve the operational control issue when Korean combat units and commander Chae arrived.”<sup>41</sup> The two sides did not fully compromise as to who would exercise the actual operational control and put off the issue to the time when ROK combat troops arrived. Thus, the formal agreement, which gave the Korean command authority to Korean units, left room for future disputes.

### **Unofficial Compromise: The Reality of the Cooperative Relationship with the U.S. Forces**

Upon arriving, General Chae wanted to make the Korean troops operate the way he intended. Then it became an important assignment for him to negotiate the OPCON issue with the U.S. forces in Vietnam. At the beginning of the ROK units’ dispatch and deployment, the U.S. forces had operational control over them under the name of Operation Good Friend.<sup>42</sup> After Korean combat troops arrived in Vietnam, and the headquarters of ROKFV was established in

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<sup>39</sup> “Brig. Gen. Lee Hoon-sup’s Note,” 4 September 1965, in *Wöllamgonghwaguk chõnt'ubudae p'abyõngül wihan kukpangbu p'agyõn sõnbaltaejangüi hyõnjip'agyõn kyõlgwabogo mit kwallyõn ch'amgojaryo* [Result Report of the Staff Visits from Ministry of Defense to Dispatch Combat troops to South Vietnam and Its Related Reference], vol. 2-1, HB02647.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Lee Hoon-sup, *Kũ ttae tangshinũn õdie issõnnũn'ga* [Where Were You at That Time] (Seoul: Samtoh, 1991), 329-330.

<sup>42</sup> Quarterly Command Report for 1st Quarter FY 66, 15 November 1965; Quarterly Command Report for 2d Quarter FY 66, 15 January 1966, Box 23, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

Saigon, the operational control over Korean troops became a serious issue. On 23 October, when the ROK Marine brigade was about to start Operation Washington, following the operational order from I Field Force commander Larsen, ROKFV commander Chae ordered them to stop that operation.<sup>43</sup> General Chae was displeased to see U.S. commanders' exercising OPCON over his units. After his remonstrating to Westmoreland and Larsen, Chae approved Operation Washington through the channel of MACV's request to ROKFV headquarters. At the conference after this incident, Westmoreland said, "General Larsen should not give instructions to General Lee (ROK Marine RCT Commander) without discussing them with General Chae," and Larsen concurred.<sup>44</sup> This incident made it a necessity for both sides to clarify the operational control issue. The U.S. claimed that ROKFV would be under the U.S. MACV commander, General Westmoreland, and ROK Capital Division and Marine Brigade would be under OPCON of the U.S. I Field Force commander, General Larsen. A draft of a joint memorandum indicating where the U.S. forces would exercise operational control over ROK forces in Vietnam was provided, but Chae "never signed" it.<sup>45</sup>

In the negotiation with MACV command, General Chae argued that Koreans should exercise an independent operational control by suggesting mainly political reasons. If the U.S.

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<sup>43</sup> Memorandum from Lee for Chae, 23 October 1965; Memorandum from Chae for Lee, 23 October 1965, in *Wöllamgonghwaguk chönt'ubudae p'abyöngül wihan kukpangbu p'agyön sönbaltaejangüi hyönjip'agyön kyölgwabogo mit kwallyön ch'amgojaryo* [Result Report of the Staff Visits from Ministry of Defense to Dispatch Combat troops to South Vietnam and Its Related Reference], vol. 2-2, August 1965-September 1965, HB02648.

<sup>44</sup> Memorandum for Record, "Conference at Nha Trang on October 31, 1965," 1 November 1965, Reel 5, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>45</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 134; Memorandum for the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, The Republic of Korea Forces, Vietnam and the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, "Command and Control Arrangements for the Republic of Korea Forces, Vietnam," Box 8, Security Classified General Record, RG 472, NARA II. The following are stipulations: "1-c. The Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam is authorized to further delegate operational control of the Republic of Korea combat and combat support forces in Vietnam to appropriate United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam subordinate commanders. 2-b. While employed in the II Corps Tactical Zone, the Republic of Korea Tiger Division and the Republic of Korea 2d Marine Brigade will operate under the control of the Commanding General, Field Force, Vietnam." Someone wrote by hand "never signed" on this document.

had OPCON over the South Korean troops, he claimed, it would suggest that Korean forces participated as mercenary forces in America's war. That perception would harm the political cause of the war: that ROK forces were participating in Vietnam to protect South Vietnam against a communist invasion, and if they appeared to be U.S. mercenaries, that would make people in the U.S., Korea, Vietnam, and other allied nations doubt the justification of the war.<sup>46</sup> Chae understood the U.S. desires to frame the war as a united global response to communist aggression and he manipulated the U.S. attitude to the benefit of Korean units in Vietnam. Furthermore, he claimed that even if ROKFV had an independent OPCON, that would not be an obstacle to achieving the common goal in the war. ROK forces could solve the common issues by cooperating with U.S. forces.<sup>47</sup> At that time, Chae's argument partly convinced General Westmoreland and other U.S. senior officers, as General Westmoreland reported to Admiral Sharp, "a formally signed arrangement [where ROK forces will operate under the control of the U.S. are recorded] could be politically embarrassing to ROK."<sup>48</sup>

However, since there was no clear agreement on operational control over the Korean troops in the document, the Americans and Koreans had different interpretations of their pact. The U.S. claimed that South Korean forces were under de facto operational control by U.S. forces. General Westmoreland noted: "My reasoning in this regard was that a signed formal agreement would not necessarily mean anything whereas Chae had agreed to put his forces under the operational control of me and in turn General Larsen."<sup>49</sup> He understood, "General Chae's demonstrated cooperation in this respect and tacit acceptance of MACV operational control is

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<sup>46</sup> Chae, *Pet'ünamjōnjaenggwa na*, 158-159.

<sup>47</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awōl han'gukkun chōnsa*, vol.1-1, 260.

<sup>48</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 134.

<sup>49</sup> General Westmoreland's Historical Briefing, 6 December 1965, Reel 6, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), VNCA.

worth more than any written agreement and provides a basis on which Chae and I are prepared to go forward.”<sup>50</sup> Although the U.S. forces admitted that the command and control arrangements for Korean troops were different compared to other allied troops, this did not mean that the ROK troops had independent operational control.<sup>51</sup> The U.S. forces’ opinion was that ROK forces’ operational control was exercised only on the surface, with the real control resting on the U.S. forces. Since the U.S. provided supplies and equipment to Korean forces, even if ROKFV had independent operational control, it could not be truly “independent” in actual operations.

In contrast, according to his memoir, Chae understood the result of negotiation to mean that Korean forces achieved independent operational control.<sup>52</sup> After the negotiations, in fact, ROKFV made efforts to exercise independent OPCON by conducting a different style of war, focusing more on pacification operations rather than search and destroy in pacifying TAOR. The U.S. military raised questions and complaints about the ROK forces’ conduct in the war, but they could not prevent Koreans from performing it. Per Col. Son Jang-rae, the assistant chief of staff for operations (G-3) of ROKFV, U.S. military leaders kept insisting on control of Korean forces before he was assigned to Vietnam in August 1966. The U.S. sometimes ordered Korean troops where to deploy and operate, and this created conflict between the two forces.<sup>53</sup> The continuing friction over the operational control of ROK forces in Vietnam paradoxically indicates that in practice MACV did not exercise OPCON over ROK troops.

Through negotiations, both the U.S. and ROK forces reached a compromise that their relationship was based more on “cooperation and coordination.” The U.S. official military

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<sup>50</sup> Memorandum for Gen. Beach from Gen. Westmoreland, “Command Relations,” 8 March 1966, Folder 15, Box 2. Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>51</sup> Chae, *Pet ’ūnamjōnjaenggwa na*, 158-159.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, 2 September 1968, *Chūngōnūl t’onghae pon pet ’ūnam chōnjaenggwa han ’gukkun*, vol.1, 111.

history of the Vietnam War states that the U.S and South Korea agreed in principle to close cooperation between the two forces in Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> General Chae and Korean forces believed, as a result of the negotiation, that they could gain the independent operational control, but it was also based on the premise that they would coordinate with the U.S. troops. Both MACV and ROKFV understood the restrictions on having complete operational control over Korean units. U.S. forces understood the political side effect of ROK troops coming under their command and control, as their previous compromise with the South Vietnamese had given up building a combined command. One study identified “a major obstacle to a combined command arrangement” as “the reluctance of South Vietnam and South Korea to relinquish sovereignty over their armed forces.”<sup>55</sup> Koreans also understood that to have a complete independent OPCON was a more rhetorical expression because they knew that Korean forces would have to depend on the U.S. forces in many aspects.

Aside from the political reason for establishing a cooperative relationship, it is important to note that the Vietnam War was a militarily unique type of war. It was not a traditional type of war, in which the front moves between army units’ coordinated maneuvers and operations. In Vietnam, major battles were decentralized. Units were assigned their territories, such as TAOR, areas of operation (AO), and operations conducted without front lines.<sup>56</sup> The war was carried out in such a way that each troop would extend its assigned region by pacification operations in each territory. Therefore, the unity of command, which enables the troops to do an organized maneuver with perfect order, was regarded as relatively less important in Vietnam. Americans

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<sup>54</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 250.

<sup>55</sup> Eckhardt, *Command and Control 1950-1969*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon L. Rottman, *The US Army in the Vietnam War 1965-73* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008), 44.

had to accept that the independence of South Vietnamese and Korean troops could be complemented with a good level of cooperation and coordination from each troop.

Even after compromising a cooperative relationship with the U.S. forces, ROKFV's exercising independent operational was imperfect and controversial. At the early stage of the dispatch, Koreans could not effectively exercise independent operational control over their forces. Korean combat troops were deployed in the area under the U.S. I Field Force command, and they depended on U.S. forces in many aspects. In that area, the U.S. troops "exerted every effort to take care of the ROK units."<sup>57</sup> Based on the working arrangement, like the U.S. (through South Vietnam) provided equipment, logistical support, construction, training, transportation, subsistence, and overseas allowances to ROK forces.<sup>58</sup> The original size of Korean forces in Vietnam was relatively small (a division size), with one army division (actually two regiments before the middle of 1966), and one marine brigade (actually a regiment size at first) in 1965 and 1966. This kind of situation allowed U.S. commanders to influence over ROK combat troops easily. Col. Son Jang-rae stated that the U.S. influence made cooperation and coordination in name only, and in reality, the Americans had operational control over Korean forces at the early stage of their participation.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, although he frequently stayed in the field, General Chae had a dual role as commander of ROKFV and Capital Division and it was not easy for him to exercise OPCON over entire Korean combat forces from ROKFV headquarters at Saigon, which was far from the locations where ROK troops were actually deployed. There was no existing

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<sup>57</sup> "Conference at Nha Trang on October 31, 1965," 1 November 1965, VNCA.

<sup>58</sup> Military Working Arrangement Between COMROK and COMUSMACV, NARA II; Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 130. "From 1 September 1966, the South Vietnamese logistic support system was changed to the U.S. direct support system. In terms of logistics support, ROKFV is receiving all equipment and supplies from the U.S. forces and is receiving 800 g of rice and 15 g of salt per day and other supply provisions from the South Vietnamese troops based on the same basis with ARVN. The Korean forces distribute the received supply to its echelons through the 100th ROK Logistics Command and logistics support group of each army division and Marine brigade and the battalions." Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Chuwöl'gun sogae*, ch.5, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, *Chüngönül t'onghae pon pet'unam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 111.

same-scale organization in ROKFV to allow cooperation with the I Field Force. Therefore, Korean combat troops in the field often had no choice but to follow the U.S. I Field Forces' operational control.<sup>60</sup>

There was another problem for ROK forces in Vietnam in the operational control over their 2d Marine Brigade. Selecting the Marine Brigade as combat troops deployed to Vietnam was a politically motivated decision. Minister of Defense Kim Sung-eun wanted to dispatch the Marine Corps to Vietnam because he was a former Commandant of the ROK Marine Corps. According to Maj. Gen. Son Hŭi-sŏn, assistant chief of staff for operations (G-3), of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kim Sung-eun had a decisive role in persuading President Park to decide to add the Marines as dispatch forces, by replacing one Army regiment.<sup>61</sup> Kim persuaded Park by stating the U.S. had a tradition to send the Marine Corps abroad first, and the Korean Marines could learn tactics from U.S. Marines who were already deployed in Vietnam. His idea was to raise the Marine regiment to a brigade and operate the Marines separate from the ROK Army and the Capital Division.<sup>62</sup> Lt. Gen. Kong Jung-sik, the commandant of the ROK Marine Corps, had already proposed the idea to the President when he organized the dispatch troops that it would be better for Marines to do combined operations with the U.S. Marines than to be under the operational control of ROKFV or U.S. Army.<sup>63</sup>

After their arrival at Cam Ranh in October 1965, the 2d Marine Brigade moved to Tuy Hoa several weeks later to fight against the 95th Regiment of the North Vietnamese Army, based on America's operational needs.<sup>64</sup> They had already started operations under the U.S. I Field

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Son Hŭi-sŏn interview, 29 March 2001 *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Kim, *Naŭi chani nŏmch'inaida*, 701.

<sup>63</sup> Kong Jung-sik, *Padaŭi sanai yŏngwŏnhan haebyŏng* [A Seaman and Forever Marine] (Seoul: Haebyŏngdae chŏllyangmunje yŏn'guso [Research Institute for Marine Corps Strategy, 2009], 239.

<sup>64</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 136.

Force before the headquarters of ROKFV arrived in Vietnam. The Korean Marine Brigade was more subordinate to the U.S. I Field Force than ROK forces in Vietnam, even after General Chae arrived. Col. Jung Tae-suk, the chief of staff of the 2d Marine Brigade, stated: “We notified headquarters of ROKFV of the operational directives from the U.S. I Field Force then got confirmation from ROKFV. Therefore, we received the command and control of the Commander of I Field Force in every operation.”<sup>65</sup> The prenominate Operation Washington, which Chae stopped because ROK Marines followed the U.S. commander’s order, was a noteworthy example. As General Westmoreland pointed out, “the ROK Marine Brigade had a command problem,” the Marine Brigade was still inclined to act independently from the command and control of ROKFV and was more willing to follow the U.S. lead.<sup>66</sup>

The Marine Brigade’s arbitrariness created conflict with the ROKFV. General Chae warned the commander of the Marine Brigade, Brig. Gen. Lee Bong-chul, to follow his directives and get his permission before starting any operation.<sup>67</sup> One of the reasons for the Marine Brigade’s deviation was that the Marines took pride in being different from the Army, and they thought that they could conduct operations autonomously from ROKFV.<sup>68</sup> Chae commented that since Marines often brought lots of casualties driven by the will to achieve brilliant military gains, he ordered them to restrain the number of operations outside the base.<sup>69</sup> Retired Col. Seo Woo-in, a former operations officer (S-3) and battalion commander in Tiger

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<sup>65</sup> Jung Tae-suk interview, 14 September 1979, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 3, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 257.

<sup>67</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 66.

<sup>68</sup> Jung Tae-suk interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 3, 14.

<sup>69</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 66.

Division (1966-1968), recalled, “ROK Marine’s way of fighting was somewhat different from the Army, and their simple but ‘brave’ frontal attack caused lots of casualties.”<sup>70</sup>

In early 1966, it was decided that ROK 2d Marine Brigade would transfer to Chu Lai in I CTZ under the U.S. III Marine Amphibious Force Command. It is still uncertain how this decision was made, but both the Americans and Koreans wanted the ROK Marine’s transfer. In November 1965, U.S. forces already wanted to “deploy the ROK Marine Regiment into the area of III MAF to reinforce I Corps,” when the ROK Tiger Division’s third infantry regiment would arrive in Vietnam.<sup>71</sup> According to Marine Commandant Kong, he requested to change ROK Marine’s operational control from the U.S. I Field Force to U.S. Marines in his meeting with General Westmoreland in South Vietnam on 7 March 1966. In his understanding, the ROK Marine Brigade was under the actual OPCON of U.S. I Field Force rather than ROKFV at that time, and he wanted them to move to the Marine’s world. MACV documents between March to July in 1966 show that ROK and U.S forces had a discussion on deciding when to transfer ROK 2d Marine Brigade to Chu Lai. Chae wanted them to move as soon as possible while the U.S. wanted to delay the time based on operational considerations.<sup>72</sup> Chae explained the “problems with Marines could become a major Korean political problem and he wanted to avoid it by separating them from ROKFV.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Seo Woo-in, author’s interview, 28 May 2018, Sönuga (Japanese Restaurant), Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>71</sup> “COMUSMACV Briefing,” 28 November 1965, Box 7, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>72</sup> Memorandum from Larsen for Westmoreland, “Report of Conversation with CG ROK Marine Brigade,” 4 March 1966; Memorandum from Gen Larsen for Gen Westmoreland, “Planning Considerations,” 30 March 1966; Memorandum from III MAF to MACV, “Conference ROK Marines,” 29 March 1966; Memorandum from III MAF for MACV, “ROK Marine Brigade,” 2 April 1966; Memorandum from I Field Force to MACV, “Movement of Brigade,” 22 July 1966; Memorandum from Lt. Gen Walt for Gen Westmoreland, “Movement of Korean Marine Brigade to I CTZ, 29 July 1966 (All from Box 36, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II).

<sup>73</sup> Memorandum from General Larsen for General Heintges, 12 May 1966, Box 36, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

After several discussions, they eventually decided to transfer ROK Marines in September. As a result, the Korean Marine Brigade became physically separated from the entire Korean troops and they became members of the Marine CTZ. After they moved, the Korean Marine Brigade frequently conducted combined operations with the U.S. Marines. The U.S. Marine Corps official history of Vietnam states that “the MAF commander had ‘coordinating authority’ over the four-battalion Korean 2d Marine Brigade (meaning orders to the Koreans took the form of requests).”<sup>74</sup> Although General Chae argued that Korean Marines were under his operational control, it was true as well that the ROK Marines were operated differently from the ROK Army in Vietnam.

### **The Americanization and Koreanization of the Vietnam War**

After their arrival in Vietnam, the Tiger Division took over the TAOR of 1,200 square kilometers Qui Nhon area from the U.S. 101st Division on 22 October and the 7th Marine Regiment on 15 November.<sup>75</sup> ROK’s area, the populous east coast area, including harbor city Qui Nhon, had been one of the most notorious areas of the VC’s guerilla action in South Vietnam, and therefore the U.S. forces had a pessimistic view as to pacification of this area.<sup>76</sup> Yet, General Chae had a plan, he believed, that would allow his forces to gain control of this area: focusing on pacification by separating the VC from Vietnamese civilians, thus “get[ting]

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<sup>74</sup> Jack Shulimson, Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith, and David A. Dawson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1997), 2.

<sup>75</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chuwölgun chönt’ujewön* [The Combat Data of ROKFV] (Saigon: Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, 1969), 159.

<sup>76</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 43; *Chuwölgun sogae* [The Introduction of ROKFV] (Saigon: Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, 1967), ch.1, 3. Also, Qui Nhon area was also transportation hub because two main roads, Highway 1 and 19, intersected there. See: Carland, *Combat Operations*, 39; Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. News Books), 1981, 383.

rid of the guerillas' hotbed and restrict[ing] their scope of activity."<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, operating bases and conducting small scale combat operations became ROK's main military activities during their first phase of operation.

In this first phase operation, the Korean troops planned to stabilize their assigned TAOR. Furthermore, it was the test stage to adjust to the "real" battlefield. However, this process was not always smooth, as facing some difficulties in execution. First, relating to the OPCON issue, the U.S. forces filed a complaint about the ROK forces' focusing on pacification operations without launching large-scale combat operations.<sup>78</sup> Second, ROK Marines, who were other key members of ROKFV, conducted a different type of war from the entire other Korean units from their initial deployment.<sup>79</sup> Third, numbers of ROK officers, who had been familiar with fighting a conventional war, were not able to understand General Chae's concept of adopting company bases as a design for conducting pacification operations. Last, ROK's task accompanied by high risk and was vulnerable against the enemy attack.

Against all the odds, General Chae pushed his plan forward, believing that the best way to accomplish ROK's strategy was through the use of small units with company bases spread throughout the ROK's TAOR. Accordingly, ROK Capital Division spent most of its time focusing on building bases and performing small-scale operations for about three to five months after their arrival in Vietnam. After that initial period of the first two months, when building bases to accommodate a battalion and conducting education and training for soldiers to adjust

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<sup>77</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa*, vol.1-1, 265.

<sup>78</sup> Chae, *Pet'ünamjönjaenggwa na*, 184.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-183; Chae Myung-shin interview, 1 August 1969, *Chüngönül t'onghae pon pet'ünam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 66.

them to real war, ROK combat forces spread out and began to build company-sized bases in their respective TAOR.

Adopting the company-sized base was an indispensable method achieving ROK's strategic and operational concept. Besides, with his internal goal of minimum casualties in mind, Chae wanted to have a grace period for his combat troops to adjust to this new environment and establish the ROK forces' way of fighting. One of the ROKFV document stated:

Each soldier, who did not have any combat experiences, had difficulties performing an operation in addition to the factors of unfamiliar terrain, the uncertainty of the enemy situation, and lack of smooth communication. The enemy well developed the operation of hit and run using a covered canal and cave. Generally, [ROK] forces' offensive was not able to make a success in seizing and destroying the enemy. Despite contacting the enemy, we often failed to keep contacting them. It was much more rare cases to succeed in giving a surprise to the enemy by the covert activities.<sup>80</sup>

General Chae did not want to cause extra casualties by launching large-scale operations, for which, in his view, ROK forces were not yet ready.<sup>81</sup> Thus, during this initial period, the Korean Army focused on building bases and training soldiers while avoiding launching large-scale operations.

In fact, even these strategic, as well as tactical efforts, began with high risk. The assigned areas of each ROK company were indeed extensive, and therefore, their bases were prone to be exposed and eliminated by enemy attacks during their construction. In late 1965, ROKFV's TAOR comprised about 1,535 square kilometers with a population of about 310,000, and each rifle company's base—since the division had thirty-three bases including seventeen company

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<sup>80</sup> Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chōnt'umidam mit chōnhun* [The Collection of Battle Story and its Lesson], October 1965–November 1967, HB02453.

<sup>81</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, *Chūngōnūl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chōnjaenggwa han'gukun*, vol. 1, 82–83

bases—occupied about 75 square kilometers even excepting the ROK Marines' TAOR.<sup>82</sup>

Therefore, in addition to considering General Chae's explanation that soldiers were not yet ready to fight well in the real battle due to the lack of training and experience during this period, paradoxically, ROK companies might easily succumb to the enemy's organized attacks.<sup>83</sup>

Luckily for ROKFV, the Koreans were able to finish building bases without having to fight significant battles with enemy forces. Lt. Col. Lee Hyo testified, "fortunately our regiment did not have to face significant enemy attacks," while his regiment was constructing company bases between December 1965 and March 1966.<sup>84</sup>

Three years later in 1969, General Chae argued that he had been convinced the enemy would not have attacked ROK forces in earnest for at least ten days after ROK companies arrived in their new assigned area. There were reasons for his confidence: the enemy forces were prudent in launching an attack, spending at least ten days to prepare and establishing the opponent's situation of strength and weakness.<sup>85</sup> Yet, his argument was more related to looking at the results, because ROK companies were in the vulnerable position of not being more confident or ready to fight, rather than leaving it to luck.

Although the first group of ROK combat troops came to Vietnam as a unit, ROKFV adopted the individual rotation policy instead of unit rotation based on its experience in the initial adjustment period. ROKFV regarded individual rotation to be better in maintaining

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<sup>82</sup> Kukpangbu chönsap'yönych'anwiwönhoe [The War History Compilation Committee of the Ministry of Defense], *Chuwöl han'gukkun chönsa charyojip* [The Source Book of the War History of ROKFV], vol.1-3, 1967, 15-46; Chuwölsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chuwölgun chönt'ujewön* [The Combat Data of ROKFV] (Saigon: Chuwölsa 1969), 1; Haptongch'ammodaehak [ROK Armed Forces Staff College], Lt. Col. Ji Deok-geon, "Wöllamjonesöüi han'gukkun chönsurüi t'adangsöng yöbu [Questions for the Validity of the Tactic of the ROK Forces in the Vietnam War]," 1967, HB02032.

<sup>83</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, *Chüngönül t'onghae pon pet'unam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 115.

<sup>84</sup> Lee Hyo interview, 17 January 1978, *Ibid.*, 186-187.

<sup>85</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 1 August 1969, *Ibid.*, 86-87.

combat power, saying “individual rotation offset the gap adjusting in the real war since the troops can always confront the enemy by generally rotating ten percent of soldiers once in a company.”<sup>86</sup> In the discussion of ROKFV staff and senior commanders, the disadvantage of unit rotation stood out despite its advantage “in training and supplying troops in addition to maintaining group cohesion because troops are organized in South Korea before coming to Vietnam.”<sup>87</sup> They said, “since the entire unit was new to the battlefield, it needs a period of inactivity to adjust the operational area and enemy situation and tactics. Moreover, a newly replaced unit would possibly bring accidents since they want to make a result based on ambition.”<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, the unique condition in Vietnam offset the disadvantage of individual rotation compared to other conventional mobile warfare: the troops conducted repetitive operations in the same area in the unmovable front. As a result, in principle, each Korean soldier had a twelve-month tour in Vietnam.<sup>89</sup>

As the actual number of ROKFV’s operations proved—there were about 2,200 operations in the under-company level, and only fifteen operations were executed and commanded in the battalion level—it was beyond question that ROKFV was inactive for the large-scale combat operation in their early participation of the war.<sup>90</sup> In fact, for not having unnecessary casualties, ROK’s operation—above company level outside of its TAOR and above battalion level inside of its TAOR—must receive the Chae (headquarters of ROKFV)’s approval before the execution during the war.<sup>91</sup> Thus, commanders had to make a prudent decision and spend a long time

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.; The Tiger Cavalry Regimental commander, Col. Sin Hyun-su interview, 29 September 1966, Ibid., 183; The Tiger 1st Regimental commander, Col. Jeon Seong-gak interview, 25 October 1966, Ibid., 431-432.

<sup>89</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, *Chuwŏlgun sogae*, ch.4, 3; Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, *Wŏllamjŏn chonghap yŏn’gu*, 1113.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 391.

<sup>91</sup> Kukpangbu chŏnsap’yŏnch’anwiwŏnhoe, *Chuwŏl han’gukkun chŏnsa charyojip*, vol. 2-1, 1969, 337.

preparing for actual combat operations. Although ROK's phased plan was aligned with the allied forces' phased war plan, the Korean troops' actual conduct was one beat behind compared to the U.S. one. In the same second phase, the Koreans were still to focus on stabilizing the territory and preparing to engage in the offensive while the U.S. was to launch and conduct an offensive. As a matter of fact, the Korean third phase was equivalent to the U.S. second phase which was to develop large-scale combat operations to destroy the enemy forces. At least in early 1966, ROK forces main effort remained in phase 1 to secure and stabilize the assigned TAOR based on building bases and operating small-scale combat operations during their campaign, which was unmatched from the U.S. forces' plan and even behind of their original plan.

The U.S. forces also embraced the dilemma in their relationship with the ROK forces. The U.S.'s political and military interests were reflected in their evaluation of ROKFV. On January 1966, the U.S. I Field Force produced varying estimates on the ROK combat troops' conduct:

On balance the Korean units can be considered about one half as effective in combat as our best US units. The ROKs have excelled in establishing defensive strong points and in securing installations, routes and facilities for which they are responsible. In offensive actions they have rarely been aggressive or quick to react to tactical opportunity. ... They can be used effectively to maintain domination over an area or clear local VC forces from the area, either alone or in coordination with ARVN units.<sup>92</sup>

First, the U.S. forces criticized the lack of ROK forces' aggression: even in the offensive combat operations, ROKs "become ponderous, slow moving affairs which are usually evaded by the VC," and they were dependent "lavishly" on "supporting fires."<sup>93</sup> Against the ROK forces'

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<sup>92</sup> Message from Nha Trang to COMUSMACV, "Evaluation of ROK Forces," 25 January 1966, Folder 15, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

inactivity, the U.S. forces grasped that ROK forces “appear most reluctant to risk taking casualties.”<sup>94</sup> Second, nonetheless, they evaluated that ROK forces were effective in regional pacification, which was not the desirable role for ROK forces from the U.S.’s view. At the same time, the U.S. forces displayed optimism in ROK’s moving to be active, commenting that “during late December and January there has been some improvement in this pattern [of reluctance].” Third, aside from their comments about the ROK’s conduct, the U.S. forces assessed the ROK leadership as “very good though it lacks a high degree of initiative,” and highly praised the discipline of each individual Korean soldiers as “excellent.”<sup>95</sup>

Despite the agreement to build a cooperative relationship with the ROK forces, the U.S. forces still wanted to employ the Korean combat troops—who were trained and armed by Americans and reflected their way—in the same way as them. For the U.S. I Field Force, which worked with the ROK forces in the II CTZ, the “primary combat mission was to search out and destroy, wherever we found them, the hard core enemy consisting of NVA and Main Force units in II Corps Tactical Zone.”<sup>96</sup> General Larsen made clear that the mission of the U.S. I Field Force was “not base it on terrain or on the defense of populated areas.”<sup>97</sup> Consequently, the U.S. forces were dissatisfied with the ROKFV, who conducted “other war” by defending and pacifying the assigned area with building company bases rather than conducting search and destroy operations.

Nevertheless, the U.S. forces’ estimation on the Korean troops tended to be more positive after the U.S. I Field Forces’ first evaluation. In the memorandum from the U.S. MACV for the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “Senior Officer Debriefing Report,” 31 July 1967, AD513366, Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

U.S. Embassy in South Vietnam in 9 February 1966, the U.S. side highly evaluated the South Korean forces' contribution in the Vietnam War: "In summary, the Korean forces have given an excellent account of themselves, and all indications point to an increasingly effective contribution on their part of defeat of the VC and the pacification of the country."<sup>98</sup> The following memorandum from the U.S. Embassy to Washington on 2 March confirmed the MACV's positive evaluation on ROKFV.<sup>99</sup> Like February's MACV document, this U.S. Embassy's memorandum evaluated that the conduct of the Korean forces had been excellent despite their lack of real battle experiences.

Although the MACV report was written based on the U.S. I Field Force's estimation of ROKFV, it showed some significant differences from its previous report. First, MACV defended ROK's passiveness by reflecting the ROKFV's circumstance: "For the first two to three months after their arrival, the senior Korean commanders closely controlled the offensive operations of their forces, in order to progressively indoctrinate the troops to combat in their new environment. This gave the impression that the ROKs lacked aggressiveness and were reluctant to take casualties."<sup>100</sup> Second, it gave a more positive view of ROK's operation and was more optimistic about the prospects of ROKFV's conduct of the offensive operation. After describing, "since arriving in-country the ROKs have achieved a kill ratio against the Viet Cong of approximately 16 to 1," MACV emphasized ROK forces' effectiveness in the combat operation: "In Operation Flying Tiger, in early January, the Koreans accounted for 192 VC killed as against only 11 ROKs killed. This accomplishment, coupled with their success in Operation Jefferson, would

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<sup>98</sup> Memorandum from Major General W.B. Rosson, "Evaluation of ROK Forces," 9 February 1966, Folder 15, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>99</sup> Telegram from the U.S. Embassy to the Department of State, "Assessment of ROK Forces in Vietnam," 2 March 1966, Folder 17, Box 5, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

<sup>100</sup> "Evaluation of ROK Forces," 9 February 1966, VNCA.

appear to constitute a valid indication of their combat effectiveness.”<sup>101</sup> Last, it elaborated ROK’s strength of their different conduct: “The ROKs have also excelled in defending and securing installations and routes for which they are responsible. They are very effective in maintaining security over an area.”<sup>102</sup>

This tendency implicated the U.S. forces dilemma regarding the ROK combat troops conduct in Vietnam: ROKs were needed despite their “unsatisfactory” conduct. In the overall estimates on the ROKFV’s conduct, despite its dissatisfaction, the U.S. forces gave a more optimistic and favorable view of the ROK forces to Washington based on the political and military judgment which need more Korean troops. Even though ROKFV themselves became more aggressive by advancing to their second phase in early 1966 after finishing their first phase and adjusting in the war, the political consideration where the U.S. government had requested Seoul to dispatch an additional combat division and the following negotiation was undergoing between the U.S. and South Korea, had significantly influenced U.S. forces’ estimation of the Koreans. Washington desperately wanted more Koreans—who were considered as brave and cheap soldiers more than any other allies—into the war. Despite its dissatisfaction, the U.S. forces’ military stance, which was badly in need of more troops for conduct the Vietnam War, was reflected in its review of ROK forces. Thus, the U.S. forces could not give a negative view alone of the ROK troops: they also need a political judgment where they had to admit the Korean troops, at least officially. On the other hand, their recognition of ROK forces’ effectiveness in the pacification among their negative views in military terms, proved at least ROKFV was achieving

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

success in pacifying their TAOR. For example, MACV's Free World Military Assistance evaluated that Koreans "are continuing a vigorous, well-planned Civic Action Program."<sup>103</sup>

Despite this kind of situation, the U.S. forces wanted ROK forces to act more aggressively by launching large-scale offensive operations and to fight like Americans: their dissatisfaction with ROK forces' focus on pacification, based on employing company bases and small-scale operations, did not subside easily. The conflict between the U.S. and ROK forces was revealed and went on the surface in the matter of how to employ newly arriving the ROK 9th (White Horse) Division. At the same time, the disagreement regarding operational control between U.S. and ROK forces arose. U.S. MACV and ROKFV disagreed on the location and mission of the 9th Division. In a memorandum from MACV to USFK, U.S. forces already decided the Korean forces' future deployment locations and noted "deployment areas listed above are provided for planning purposes based on the current tactical need. Final disposition of ROKA forces could change depending on the tactical situation at the time of deployment."<sup>104</sup> At first, the U.S. suggested deploying two ROK regiments to conduct search and destroy missions along the 17th Parallel, a borderline where fierce battles had continued against the North Vietnamese Army. Another regiment would have a security mission in Ninh Hoa, Nha Trang, Cam Rahn, and Phan Rang in the II Corps area of operations.<sup>105</sup>

However, ROK forces wanted to deploy the 9th Division around Highway 1, between Tui Hoa and Nha Trang, so that they could operate the two army divisions together. ROKFV's

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<sup>103</sup> "Free World Military Assistance Highlights," 8 January 1966. Box 47, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>104</sup> Memorandum for USFK Commander, "Deployment of Additional ROK Forces to Vietnam," 11 January 1966, Box 36, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>105</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], "1966 nyöndo chuwöl han'gukkun chakchön'gaeyo mit 1967 nyöndo chönyökkyehoek pogosö [The Summary of 1966 ROKFV Operations and the Report of 1967 Campaign Plan]," HB02338.

intended to put the 9th Division in densely populated areas and pacify the TAOR south of the Capital Division.<sup>106</sup> Against ROK's idea, Westmoreland did not want the 9th Division "becoming static minded."<sup>107</sup> The U.S. forces complained that ROK forces came to Vietnam only to obtain the cause without the actual fights: Why Koreans are not fighting when they have come to Vietnam to the fight?"<sup>108</sup> ROKFV revealed its concern in its document:

The difference of the opinions between the U.S. and ROK [on the operating the 9th Division] was, in the end, related with the matter of how to conduct in Vietnam: whether focusing on search and destroy the enemy or securing the population or separating them from the Viet Cong. On the other hand, we also had the intention to minimize our sacrifice. It is the matter of antinomic issue (dilemma) between the cause of dispatching here, which is actively supporting the Vietnam War and [interest of] the restriction of the sacrifice. Therefore, the headquarters have difficulties in resolving technically in cooperating and dealing with the allied forces for the operations.<sup>109</sup>

Meanwhile, despite opposing the Koreans' idea, the U.S. forces could not help accepting it because they need more troops. Up until one month before the 9th Division arrived, after approximately eight negotiations between the two forces, the decision reflected the Koreans' opinion immediately before the division's departure: The 9th Division would be deployed along the highway 1, south of the Tiger Division's TAOR.

Depending on the 9th Division's potential arrival, on 15 August 1966, ROKFV finally established the corps-size field headquarters in Nha Trang close to the headquarters of I Field

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 23-24; Son Jang-rae interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 112; Letter from General W.C. Westmoreland to General Dwight E. Beach, Commander of US Forces in Korea, 24 June 1966, Box 36, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>107</sup> Memorandum from I Field Force to MACV, "Visit of COMUSMACV," 10 July 1966, Box 36, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>108</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 112

<sup>109</sup> "1966 nyŏndo chuwŏl han'gukkun chakchŏn'gaeyo mit 1967 nyŏndo chŏnyŏkkyehoek pogosŏ," HB02338.

Force.<sup>110</sup> General Chae was pleased because “he thought he could make a great contribution by being closer to the troops in the field as opposed to staying in Saigon most of the time.”<sup>111</sup> I Field Force commander, Maj. Gen. Larsen opposed Korean troops’ establishing the corps headquarters from the first. In the memorandum on March 8, the deputy chief of staff, MACV, Maj. Gen. Abbey noted, “[Larsen] hoped that General Chae would not establish a corps-size headquarters at Nha Trang through which Field Force, Vietnam I would have to deal with the ROK divisions.”<sup>112</sup> Larsen worried that “[de facto operational control over ROK forces] may not continue subsequent to the arrival of additional ROK forces.” Furthermore, Larsen desired direct operational control over Korean combat troops after the additional troops arrived.<sup>113</sup> Against this, General Westmoreland’s opinion was: “We have had a perfectly workable relationship with Chae in the past and I am confident we shall continue to enjoy the same relationship in the future,” even though ROK corps headquarters was going to be built in the field.<sup>114</sup> This opinion was based on his idea that General Larsen had exercised de facto operational control over Korean forces and the fact that consulting General Chae “on operational matters as a matter of routine,” would not be changed in the future.<sup>115</sup>

After the 9th Division arrived in Vietnam between September and October in 1966, Korean forces in Vietnam became a corps-sized unit with 50,000 troops in the area, which enabled them to perform a more independent operation. In August since ROKFV commander,

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<sup>110</sup> MACFWMAO Fact Sheet, “Republic of Korea Military Assistance to Republic of Vietnam,” 10 December 1966, Folder 15, Box 2. Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>111</sup> General Westmoreland’s Historical Briefing, 1 March 1966, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), Reel 6, VNCA.

<sup>112</sup> Memorandum from General Richard S. Abbey, “ROK/US Command Relations,” 9 March 1966, Folder 15, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Memorandum for Gen. Beach from Gen. Westmoreland, “Command Relations,” 8 March 1966, VNCA.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

Maj. Gen. Chae was promoted to Lieutenant General, and the headquarters of ROKFV in Saigon was upgraded to over 400 personnel, Korean headquarters then came to enjoy more nearly equal status with the U.S. MACV command, in terms of representing Korean sovereignty.<sup>116</sup> Also, ROK Corps headquarters with about 200 personnel in Nha Trang enabled Korean units to cooperate with U.S. forces and the South Vietnamese army in the field. One U.S. official document wrote: “The ROKFV Field Command, Nha Trang provides overall operational control of the two ROK combat divisions and Marine Brigade.”<sup>117</sup>

ROKFV’s structural change—the enhancement of troops to the corps size and establishing the field headquarters—led to actual change in the dynamics of its relationship with the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. This change was a foundation for ROKFV to actually exercise the OPCON over their subordinate elements and coordinate closely with U.S. I Field Force in an equivalent position.<sup>118</sup> A U.S. Army’s Vietnam War study admits that South Koreans, unlike other foreign allied forces, were not under the U.S. OPCON:

The introduction of Free World Military Assistance Forces into South Vietnam raised the question of their command and control. Two separate arrangements were developed. For troops provided by countries other than the Republic of Korea, operational control rested with the U.S. military commander in whose area these troops were used. In the case of the South Korean forces, a compromise was worked out between U.S., Korean, and Vietnamese officials by which these forces would remain under their own control, within limits established by a council to be known as the Free World.<sup>119</sup>

Rather than building a combined command to achieve the unity of command, the U.S. forces built a parallel command where the South Vietnamese, Americans, and Koreans would cooperate. In order to make up the parallel command’s weakness, they set the common goal for

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<sup>116</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 138.

<sup>117</sup> Fact Sheet, “Republic of Korea Military Assistance to Republic of Vietnam,” 10 December 1966, VNCA.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Eckhardt, *Command and Control 1950-1969*, 60.

the combined campaign. For example, one U.S. study noted “MACV Commander Gen. Westmoreland retained operational / tactical control of 3rd Country units. ... With Korea, an arrangement was effected in which Viet II Corps CO Gen. Loc, 1st Field Force CO Gen. Larsen and Korean Corps CO Gen. Chae met every 6 months with their staff to co-ordinate the next 6 months of operation and strategy.”<sup>120</sup> However, in reality, cooperation and coordination were not smooth and easy, mainly because of each countries’ different interests in the same war.

Obtaining autonomous OPCON in Vietnam meant that the ROK forces were able to decide and execute their concept of operations. In the large scheme, they followed the allied strategy for the conduct of the war, but the Koreans tried to embrace a different method for their own strategy. Their following different conduct of war from the beginning made the U.S. forces accept ROK forces as distinct from them. Larsen pointed out, “the Vietnam War was an opportunity to show that Koreans could operate on their own without American forces or advisers looking over their shoulders.”<sup>121</sup> The Koreans wanted to prove their ability to the Americans and other allies that they could conduct the war without being under the U.S. operational control. Thus, upon arriving, ROK forces in Vietnam conducted a different type of war by focusing mainly on pacification operations, and they were successful. The ambiguity and flexibility in the understanding operational control over ROK forces allowed Korean units to fight their way of war, and their military success, in addition to the unique political situation, came to be the main reason the Americans yielded to the Koreans on operational control.

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<sup>120</sup> “As GI’s Leave Vietnam: War Role of the Allies,” *US News & World Report*, 12 January 1970.

<sup>121</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 135.

In addition to the establishment of independent OPCON, at the end of 1966, Korean troops succeeded in being accepted and acknowledged as an autonomous presence. The MACV report to CINCPAC in December 1966 stated:

[The] primary difference lies in the fact that ROK units operate within an established TAOR and consider their primary mission to be pacification. US forces and other FWMAF [Free World Military Assistance Forces] are oriented more to search and destroy operations throughout the country and do not place similar emphasis on securing a large fixed TAOR [like ROK forces].<sup>122</sup>

This remark showed that the U.S. forces no longer strongly expected the Koreans to fight like them. Even though the U.S. forces had required ROK forces to execute the same search and destroy operations, at the end of 1966, they admitted that the Korean's conduct in the Vietnam War was different from the that of the U.S. forces. This kind of evaluation was to be confirmed during the war, especially after Koreans achieved success in a series of large-scale offensive operations in 1967.

Here, the Korean forces' achievement in the warfighting played a role. Even after the Vietnam War, in his research report, Lt. Gen. Larsen admitted the difference between U.S. and ROK forces:

U.S. troops had been taught to make full use of the helicopter. The Americans had extensive logistical support and, in addition had a much larger area of tactical operations ... The Koreans, on the other hand, had a set area more or less tied to the local population, a circumstance that required the Koreans to be more careful of the manner in which they handled themselves tactically in searching out the enemy. The Koreans had slightly different missions, too, one of which was to keep the roads and Highway I open and to protect the local people at whichever point they made contact with them.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Memorandum for Commander, CINCPAC, "ROK Activities in RVN," 3 December 1966, Box 36, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>123</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 143.

Larsen also pointed out that “the Koreans had been primarily taught to act defensively, that is to fight in the defense of their own country.”<sup>124</sup> General Westmoreland stated that the Koreans only played one instrument, “the bass drum” in an orchestra, South Korea was required to play another instrument, yet the Koreans were particularly effective in pacification operations.<sup>125</sup> When the U.S. search and destroy focused on killing guerillas directly, the ROK’s doctrine focused on the pacification by the separation of guerillas from civilians, and for the ROK forces, destroying the VC would be the second priority. Later in 1968, Admiral Sharp and General Westmoreland noted in a report to the Department of Defense, “Although Korean military forces work closely and in a spirit of cooperation with US and Vietnamese units, they are a separate tactical entity and not under U.S operational control.”<sup>126</sup> Whether they liked or disliked the Koreans’ conduct in the war, the U.S. forces finally accepted Koreans as a different entity of the Vietnam War.

This compromise implicates that the U.S., South Vietnamese, and South Korean forces conducted the different wars in the same Vietnam War. General Westmoreland observed, “The three U.S. field forces and the respective South Vietnamese corps were co-equal commands which operated in a spirit of mutual cooperation. A similar arrangement existed with the largest contingent of Free World forces, those from the Republic of Korea.”<sup>127</sup> The U.S. MACV’s *Command History 1968* wrote, “Although the ROKs had been slow to respond in some instances, since Seoul kept a tight rein on them, these arrangements [‘of coordination, cooperation, and mutual support’] had been generally satisfactory.”<sup>128</sup> However, historians like

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 257.

<sup>126</sup> Ulysses S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), 224.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 104

<sup>128</sup> Headquarters of U.S. MACV, *Command History 1968*, vol.1, 302, Folder 1, Box 0, Bud Harton Collection, VNCA.

Harry Summers' criticism was that being unable to build a combined command in the Vietnam War harmed the unity of effort, and therefore it was one of the significant failures of the war.<sup>129</sup> Adrian R. Lewis further argues that the unity of command was never established in Vietnam, saying, "the chain of command in Vietnam not only violated the principle of war unity of command, it violated commonsense."<sup>130</sup> ROK forces establishing and exercising near independent OPCON in Vietnam was also based mainly on the politically oriented decision: Pursuing its national interest for the Koreans, and avoiding the deficiency of the justification of the war for the Americans. As General Chae argued in the conference, this decision strengthened the political justification of the ROK's participation, as General Larsen also stated that "Korea's entry into the war in Vietnam showed the world that while Korea was not directly affected by the war it was, nevertheless, willing to go to its neighbor's assistance."<sup>131</sup>

The three countries were not effectively able to unify their war efforts. However, it is inappropriate to blame Koreans for this; if someone wants to, they should understand that the U.S. policy to limit the war efforts and the lack of United Nations authority to justify the war, resulting in their not being able to build the combined command with South Vietnam. As a result, despite having the same external strategic goal of pacifying South Vietnam, the allied forces conducted the war with different internal goals and strategies. Since each had own political and military dilemma, the U.S. forces had to accept the South Korean forces' different conduct. Moreover, South Koreans' achievement in the pacification played a role to be admitted as a different entity. In the big picture, one might say that the two countries' different conducts—Americans focusing on the search and destroy and South Koreans focusing on the pacification

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<sup>129</sup> For more details see: Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982).

<sup>130</sup> Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 240-241.

<sup>131</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 135.

operation—balanced in terms of the military efforts to pacify South Vietnam. However, the reality of the war was not that simple.

### Chapter 3

#### “Defensive but Effective”: ROKFV’s Tactics and Its Conduct in 1966

##### “How Do We Fight?”: ROK’s Tactic in Vietnam

Tactics—the lowest of three levels of warfighting to realize strategic and operational concepts—employed by ROK forces during the Vietnam War were not that different from those prevalent in the U.S. forces. ROK’s tactics in Vietnam generally followed the tactics of the U.S. Army, as ROKA had been trained with the U.S. Army’s field manual.<sup>1</sup> Lt. Col. Lee Hyo, chief of operations of the Tiger Cavalry Regiment, testified, “We could not achieve results [in early days] because we were just following the American conventional war fight doctrine against guerillas who were positioned inside the Vietnamese population without establishing an actual front line.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, South Koreans relied on the same weapons and logistics system prevalent in

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<sup>1</sup> MACV Directive 525-4, “Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam,” 17 September 1965, Folder 3, Box 3, Larry Berman Collection, VNCA.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Hyo interview, 17 January 1978, Kukpangbu kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chūngōnūl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chōnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], vol. 1 (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso, 2001), 186.

the U.S. forces. Lee argued, after five to six months of an adjustment period, Koreans were able to develop their own tactics suitable for fighting in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it was 1968, two and half years later after their participation, ROKFV was able to publish its own tactical manual for conducting its Vietnam War based on “warfighting skills, lessons, and training which have been developed by ROK forces’ various operations.”<sup>4</sup> For the objective of the publication, it wrote: “This manual is a basic tactical doctrine guide for all levels of commanders and staff officers of ROKFV to conduct military operations in Vietnam, and the education reference for those preparing for the dispatch to Vietnam.”<sup>5</sup>

In a large-scale combat operation above battalion size, ROK troops aimed at conducting an encircling attack on the enemy forces, based on the operational concept of “seize and destroy,” which they differentiated from the U.S. Army’s “search and destroy.”<sup>6</sup> *The Introduction of ROKFV* wrote: “Combat operations should focus on destroying the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong by encircling the enemy through quick air and ground maneuvers with a superior number of troops and firepower.”<sup>7</sup> In an encircling operation, Koreans thought two elements were important: mounting a surprise attack and concentrate superior strength and firepower against the enemy forces.<sup>8</sup> When finding and seizing the enemy, Koreans often requested artillery or air support to destroy the enemy forces. In terms of relying on firepower, it was the typical American style of conducting their operations. After setting up a target area,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Wöllamjonesöüi han'gukkun chönsul* [Tactics of the ROK Forces in the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, 1969), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 23; Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Wöllamjön chonghabyön'gu* [The Comprehensive Research on the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, 1974), 2-2.

<sup>7</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chuwölgun sogae* [The Introduction of ROKFV] (Saigon: Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, 1967), ch.2, 3.

<sup>8</sup> “A Korean General Tells How to Beat the Viet Cong,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 15 May 1967, Folder 18, Box 33, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

ROK combat troops flew to the area with U.S. support helicopters and they started a maneuver to encircle the enemy forces. However, since the enemy forces often had foreknowledge that the Koreans were coming, the surprise element was eliminated in terms of keeping the enemy from knowing the area where ROK troops were going to attack them. Even though some company commanders preferred maneuvering covertly on foot from the initial position to the target area based on the idea of surprising the enemy, ROK's large-scale operations were mainly carried out by airmobile tactics.<sup>9</sup> It was not only due to the safety but also attempting to bring a surprising impact on the enemy forces by relying on overwhelming speed and firepower with a combination of vertical and horizontal envelopment of the enemy forces.<sup>10</sup>

Since the Vietnam War was not a war with a large number of troops moving with a front line, large-scale operations often translated into small-scale operations. Such operations were not executed by large military maneuvers, but by small units following a given route to find and destroy enemy forces. When enemy forces were found, they requested fire support or destroyed them. In ROK's encircling operations, some units attacked the enemy forces while others were cutting off the enemy's retreat. As a result, even though the Korean concept of destroying the enemy forces was "to destroy or neutralize VC," finding the enemy became important in actual combat operations due to the reality of guerrilla warfare realities that "the VC may be everywhere or they may be nowhere."<sup>11</sup> In this regard, ROK's success in large-scale combat operations relied on military intelligence and small-scale operations to find VC or their bases.

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<sup>9</sup> Seo Gyeong-seok, *Chōnt'ugamgak* [Feel for Combat] (Seoul: Saemt'ō, 1991), 284-285.

<sup>10</sup> Chuwōl han'gukkun saryōngbu, *Wōllamjōnesōi han'gukkun chōnsul*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> The Tiger Division, "Company Tactical Base Concept," 1967, Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chungdaejōnsulgijjaryo* [Primary Sources about the Company Tactical Base], 20 January 1971, HB01685.

It was this small-scale combat operation under company size that dominated the ROK forces' combat operations in their conduct of the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup> The underlying reason was from the operational priorities in ROKFV's pacification strategy: separation of VC from the people rather than search and destroy them. Koreans had an additional realistic reason for not fighting exactly like Americans and therefore focused more on pacification operations instead of "search and destroy." One U.S. study observed, "since the ROKs did not have helicopters and were not highly mobile, they performed clearing and holding operations instead of large-scale offensive sweeps."<sup>13</sup> Partly due to the lack of mobility and firepower for which they had to depend upon U.S. support, "clear and hold" operation in their assigned area became ROK's primary operation. Tactics used in small-scale operations—such as reconnaissance, patrol, and ambush—became most important for the Korean combat troops. Those anti-guerrilla tactics were used in the various realities of Vietnam to counter the enemy guerilla-warfare tactics. Thus, combat skills used for such tactics became the main combat drill and training for the ROK soldiers dispatching to Vietnam.

Among ROK's tactics, adopting the company tactical base (Co Tac Base) was the unique and significant Korean method facilitating its strategic and operational concepts. It constituted the backbone for the ROK forces' conduct in the Vietnam War, as ROKFV defined it, "a tactical base is the primary concept to realize ROKFV's basic concepts of strategy, separation, destroy, and expand the pacified area."<sup>14</sup> From the arrival in Vietnam, General Chae issued the general directives to his troops to build and employ a company-sized base.<sup>15</sup> As a result, for about five

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<sup>12</sup> Chönp'yönwi [War History Complication Committee], "Wöllam ch'amjön t'onggye [A Statistics of the Dispatch in South Vietnam]," 1972, HB01620.

<sup>13</sup> "Aussies, ROKs, and Other Allies," Folder 1, Box 33, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

<sup>14</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjonesöüi han'gukkun chönsul*, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa*, vol.1-1, 266; Chae, *Pet'ünamjönjaenggwa na*, 180.

months from their arrival to March of 1966, each rifle company focused on building its own base and conducting small-scale combat operations such as reconnaissance, patrol, and ambushes around its base.

Compared to other conventional wars, employing strategic and tactical bases was indeed regarded as the general conduct of the Vietnam War. Allied troops including the Koreans built and operated bases to conduct their war.<sup>16</sup> They built bases as a foothold for the military operations since allied forces had to occupy their assigned area in South Vietnam in order to fight against the revolutionary guerilla warfare. The primary purpose and function of the U.S. base tactic were to support its conventional type of operational strategy, namely, search and destroy. Thus, U.S. forces called their base a Fire Base (FB) or Fire Support Base (FSB), and it normally consisted of a battery of artillery with six pieces of 155mm Howitzer offering artillery fire support for the infantry's search and destroy operations.<sup>17</sup> Also, durability was considered in the initial base building. With the defense from at least battalion-size infantry, the base was also designed to sustain itself for three to fourteen days or even semi-permanently in some locations.<sup>18</sup>

While the U.S. base model was oriented to large-scale combat operations, the ROK base concept was not solely focused on supporting conventional combat operations. Rather it was designed to facilitate a Korean pacification strategy and subsequent operations by realizing ROK's operational priorities of separating local people from the VC. General Chae explained, "we hit and stay, not search and destroy," and therefore establishing bases was the primary

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>17</sup> David Ewing Ott, *Vietnam Studies: Field Artillery, 1954-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975), 55-57.

<sup>18</sup> Randy J. Kolton, "Anticipation and Improvisation: The Fire Base Concept in Counterinsurgency Operation," (Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1990).

method for the Korean forces' "clear and hold" strategy to pacify a region.<sup>19</sup> Based on this plan, ROK bases were built as company size, and not above battalion size. A rifle company, consists of 175 soldiers with three rifle platoons and one mortar platoon, was the smallest functional infantry unit in ROKA, and thus ROKFV regarded a company as the smallest unit to conduct the tactical level of operations by themselves.<sup>20</sup> Each company constructed its own bases and enabled them to conduct pacification operations in their assigned area of operation centering around these bases. As a result, by splitting the unit into a company size and spreading them out in ROK's TAOR, ROKFV intended to control as large an area as possible.

By allocating troops in the area with company-sized bases, the ROKFV aimed to separate the VC from local people. Accordingly, company bases were required to be built on strategically important places which could be more suitable for performing pacification rather than conventional military operations. The *ROK Tactical Manual in the Vietnam War* defined, "the key terrain feature in the Vietnam War is a populated area, area of production, transport center, important bridges, lines of communications, and major public and military facilities, rather than commanding ground (heights)."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, "considering the distinct characteristics of the Vietnam War, there is no need to choose commanding ground for the location of the company tactical base," and "occupying the hill itself has no meaning and was not decisive for the conduct in the [Vietnam] war."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Leading Teacher," *Newsweek*, no. 69, 10 April 1967.

<sup>20</sup> "Strength: ROK Forces in Vietnam," in *Chuwölsa pyöngnyöksujun* [The Level of Troops Strength of ROKFV], March 1966-June 1967, HB02019.

<sup>21</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Wöllamjön chonghap yön'gu* [Comprehensive Research on the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, 1974), 110.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Based on the Co Tac Base, each company performed both combat and civil affairs operations. In all of its combat operations, the base was tasked to perform small-scale combat operations. By building close to the villages and closing off the path to the villages, the base could, and would perform the function of protecting the local people.<sup>23</sup> For such reasons, during the daytime, one or two platoons would conduct reconnaissance and patrols in their area of responsibility, and at night, generally, one-third of the company did ambushes against the VC outside of the base.<sup>24</sup> The ROK base also functioned as a foothold to perform civil affairs operations. Each company performed civil affairs operations in its neighboring village. While setting up a brotherhood relationship with its neighbor village, each company regularly visited it to conduct civil affairs operations, such as helping with farm work, building houses, contribute to medical and food aid, etc.<sup>25</sup>

The U.S. forces questioned the Koreans' way of using bases mainly because it was different from their doctrine.<sup>26</sup> To a large degree, this question was related to their complaints about the ROK forces' different conduct in the Vietnam War. Coupled with the "clear and hold" operation, the Korean base tactic was often criticized for being passive and defensive in conducting the war. The base was often regarded as a symbol of Korean passiveness.<sup>27</sup> From a tactical perspective, the U.S. side thought that ROK's base was vulnerable to enemy attacks because of its size. They thought that company size forces could be more easily isolated and destroyed by massive enemy attacks. Americans were also concerned that effective fire support

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<sup>23</sup> Yukkunbonbu [Headquarters the ROK Army], *Wöllamjõnũi chõnhun* [Lessons from the Vietnam War], vol. 1 (Seoul: Yukkunbonbu, 1966), 18.

<sup>24</sup> Chuwõl han'gukkun saryõngbu, *Wöllamjõnesõi han'gukkun chõnsul*, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Yukkunbonbu, *Wöllamjõnũi chõnhun*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Chuwõl han'gukkun saryõngbu, *Chuwõlgun sogae*, ch.2, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Message from Nha Trang to COMUSMACV, "Evaluation of ROK Forces," 25 January 1966, Folder 15, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

would be limited to the company-size operations, and therefore it would be hard to concentrate combat power for any offensive operation.<sup>28</sup> The U.S. forces kept recommending at least battalion-sized bases, following the U.S. model, which mainly functioned to support a conventional type of operational strategy to eliminate enemy forces.

Yet, General Chae had a different point of view. He was convinced that a company, the smallest tactical unit in the army, could defend against a vastly superior enemy if it took appropriate measures and preparation. Building company-sized bases for this war was his “calculated risk,” drawn from lessons learned in the Korean War, that a well-prepared defensive position supported with enough firepower was able to defeat a larger enemy forces’ conventional attack.<sup>29</sup> Chae’s directive on building and employing such a company base was as follows:

First, build the [company] base to stand against the enemy’s regiment-sized attack. Stock up on ammunition and foods for defense.  
 Second, build the base inner artillery fire zone. Compensate the gap between bases with the reconnaissance and night ambush.  
 Third, utilize this as a base for the pacification and support for South Vietnam’s village building.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Chae, *Pet’ūnamjōnjaenggwa na*, 180; Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, *Chūngōnūl t’onghae pon pet’ūnam chōnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 84.

<sup>29</sup> For more details see: Chuwōl han’gukkun saryōngbu *Wōllamjōn chonghap yōn’gu*, 715-730. The ROK company base should be designed to be defensible for at least 48 hours against an enemy all-out attack. It was designed as a circle, allowing an all-around defense to respond to enemy attacks from any direction. The diameter of such a base was about 150 m, considered the defensive front of the company. Also, the base put dual defense lines, including outer and inner lines, around the base to allow the company to move the inner line to keep fighting. In the outer line, two soldiers occupied the defensive fighting positions (DFP), with trenches vertically connected to their squad and platoon leader, which enabled the leaders to control their soldiers and protect the base against the enemy if they invaded the DFPs. In the inner defense line, the mortar and fire platoon was stationed. The fire plan was supported by obstacles such as wire, mines and booby traps especially considering night fighting. Moreover, for the successful defense of the base, early detection of the enemy and their firepower support was important. Thus, a ROK company employed its listening post outside the base at night to detect the enemy as early as possible and place the bases within range to receive artillery support from the higher level of command.

<sup>30</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awōl han’gukkun chōnsa*, vol. 1-1, 266.

Adopting bases of company-size was the best possible way to achieve the dual objectives of supporting pacification operations as well as providing enough strength for each bases' self-defense. From this point of view, Chae did not split his troops as a platoon size due to its vulnerability against the enemy forces' attack, despite its possible advantage to be able to control more areas than the company size.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the ROK's approach was flexible enough to execute a population-centric approach to pacification while also fighting against the enemy when necessary.

It was not until August 1966 that the ROK company base proved its defensive capability against an enemy all-out attack. In the Battle of Duc Co, one company of the Tiger Cavalry Regiment defeated a regimental size North Vietnamese regular force by successfully defending its base. Followed by this tactical victory, in February 1967, one ROK Marine company as well defended its base and defeated an overwhelming number of North Vietnamese regulars in the Battle of Tra Binh.<sup>32</sup> After a ROK company-sized base proved its validity by a significant victory, the U.S. forces' concern about such a possible vulnerability of ROK bases facing a large-scale enemy attack was to some degree resolved. At a MACV commanders' conference on 24 September 1967, by the experience of ROKFV establishing such defensive positions," The U.S. I Field Force commander, Lt. Gen. William B. Rosson, suggested that "ROKFV present their procedures for establishing field defensive position,"<sup>33</sup> General Westmoreland agreed, and required General Chae "to organize a presentation for the next Commanders' Conference."<sup>34</sup> At the conference on 3 December, Chae explained that the company base concept was central to

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<sup>31</sup> Chae, *Pet'ūnamjōnjaenggwa na*, 180.

<sup>32</sup> Choi Yong-ho, *Han'gwōnūro ingnūn pet'ūnamjōnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [The Vietnam War and the ROK forces] (Seoul: Kukpangbu Kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso [The Institute for Military History], 2004), 293-299.

<sup>33</sup> Memorandum for Record, "MACV Commanders' Conference 24 September 1967," 12 October 1967, Reel 11, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

ROKFV's securing the large ROK TAOR.<sup>35</sup> Then the ROKFV presenter, the commander of the Tiger Cavalry Regiment, Col. Baek Myung-hak, claimed that this way of fighting was suitable for the conduct of the Vietnam War. He argued that the ROK company base was designed for both types of war—"conventional and unconventional insurgency war"—as proved highly successful in this conflict. After Baek's presentation, Chae once again promoted the CO Tac Base concept, stating "I hope his presentation provided you information and reference materials for your future operational planning."<sup>36</sup> U.S. senior officers responded favorably to his presentation.<sup>37</sup>

After the success in a series of defenses, adopting the company base came to be recognized as ROKFV's distinctive tactic. One U.S. Army Major introduced ROK's company base tactic by noting: "When the Koreans enter an area where they intend to stay for some time, they immediately construct elaborate company bases. ... From these strongpoints extensive patrols and ambushes are conducted day and night."<sup>38</sup> Even the North Vietnamese considered that adopting such a base was one of the South Koreans' tactical strengths: "ROK's building a solid base easily in two or three days."<sup>39</sup> ROK Army brass went even further, arguing that the U.S. forces adapted the ROK's base concept. In an interview in 1969, General Chae claimed that the U.S. firebase originated from the Korean base concept (the concept of the Korean base).<sup>40</sup> The 3rd Battalion commander of the 1st Tiger Regiment, Lt. Col. Park Kyung-suk, confirmed this argument that such a base concept came to be more accepted in conducting the war

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Col. Baek's entire presentation is contained here. The Tiger Division, "Company Tactical Base Concept," 1967, Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chungdaejönsulgijijaryo* [Primary Sources about the Company Tactical Base], 20 January 1971, HB01685.

<sup>37</sup> "MACV Commanders' Conference 24 September 1967," VNCA.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald R. Rasmussen, "ROK Operations in Central Vietnam," *Military Review* 48, no. 1 (1968), 54.

<sup>39</sup> Chuwōl han'gukkun saryōngbu, *Chuwōlgun sogae*, ch.1, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Chūngōnūl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chōnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 86.

following the ROK's success.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, one of the U.S. Army documents argued that this Korean base was not a unique concept: "They employ no defensive tactics that are peculiarly their own; there is no secret to their success. What they do has been taught them by U.S. Army advisers and can be found in our manuals."<sup>42</sup> This U.S. argument ended up with a tactical (not strategic) evaluation of the ROK company base, admitting only ROK base's success in defense tactics. At the same time, unlike the Korean side's argument, the U.S. base concept, which served as support for conventional military operations, was not the same as the Koreans'. For the Koreans, the true difference of their base concept was the purpose of the pacification operations to secure and stabilize the region. ROK company base had a higher level of purpose and was not merely for the defense. As a result, during the Vietnam War, the U.S. and ROK forces adopted base tactics in a different way based on their respective strategy and operational concepts.

### **The Battle of Duc Co: The Success of the ROK Company Base and its Afterwards Reality**

On 24 June 1966, the U.S. I Field Force made an official request to the Headquarter of the ROKFV to send one ROK Tiger battalion to participate in the U.S. 25th Infantry Division's Operation Paul Revere (May to August 1966).<sup>43</sup> This operation had been executed mainly by the U.S. 3d Brigade of the 25th Division under Brig. Gen. Glenn D. Walker, to search and destroy the North Vietnamese regular forces and the VC in Pleiku Province east of the Cambodian border, and they needed more troops in conducting the operation in this vast area.<sup>44</sup> However,

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<sup>41</sup> Park Kyung-suk, author's interview, 2 June 2018, Interviewee's home, Daejeon, South Korea.

<sup>42</sup> Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Military Operations Vietnam Primer: Lessons Learned*, 21 April 1967, 43-44, Folder 1, Box 1, Stephen F. Maxner Collection, VNCA.

<sup>43</sup> Sudosadan [The Capital Division], "Chönt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt'u [Combat After Action Report No. 41: The Battle of Duc Co]," 1966, HB00094.

<sup>44</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 289; Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol. 1-2 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1979), 363.

Col. Son Jang-rae, G-3 of ROKFV, said that the U.S. request was not only motivated by its lack of manpower but based more on a scheme to move the Koreans out of their “sanctuary” and test their combat capability.<sup>45</sup> The G-3 assistant in the ROK Capital Division, Lt. Col. Kim Ki-taek also suggested, “although the U.S. request was based on the good reasons of their lack of troops and the call for mutual support, what they actually attempted was to make us be obedient to them by changing the company base concept after having difficulties in fighting against the North Vietnamese regulars in the enemy’s area.”<sup>46</sup> Although the ROK forces had been regarded as successful in the pacification operations inside their TAOR, the U.S. forces kept doubting the ROK’s combat capability for fighting a conventional war against the North Vietnamese regular army. Thus, this dispatch request was originated from the U.S. forces’ dissatisfaction with the ROK forces who were inactive for the large-scale combat operation and not following the American way of conduct.

Against the official request of the I Field Force commander, Lt. Gen. Larsen, ROKFV commander, Lt. Gen. Chae was cautious in the decision of sending his troops to the battlefield in the U.S. forces’ area of operation.<sup>47</sup> Chae explained:

We sent troops in need of combined operation with the U.S. and South Vietnam. However, since this would be the first operation against the North Vietnamese regulars, this had a potential risk to hurt our prestige in case we failed. This was why we were very prudent and cautious. We agreed after having a confidence to make result without sacrifices and attempted to make ROK forces to adjust for the case we deployed to the Cambodian border after the pacification of our TAOR was over.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, 2 September 1968, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 117

<sup>46</sup> Kim Ki-taek interview, 18 June 1979, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 375.

<sup>47</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, “1966 nyŏndo chuwŏl han’gukkun chakchŏn’gaeyo mit 1967 nyŏndo chŏnyŏkkyehoek pogosŏ,” HB02338.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

This remark again implied the Korean forces' dilemma in the relationship with the U.S. forces. The Koreans wanted to keep a justification for their participation as well as achieving real benefits in the relationship with the U.S. forces, based on their internal goal of achieving maximum results with minimum sacrifice. Despite its potential risk of a large number of casualties, General Chae found that it was hard to justify the refusal against the U.S. forces' official request. Koreans came to Vietnam as the U.S. and South Vietnam's ally and relied heavily on the U.S. forces' support for their conduct. He wrote, "I could not decline General Larsen's request since he regarded this request as for cooperation of the two forces. Larsen had supported my opinion in the negotiation with the U.S. Army generals about the OPCON issue over the Korean troops before. Moreover, since the U.S. forces made concessions in the negotiation on how to employ the new coming ROK White Horse Division before, there was no way for the Korean side to decline the U.S. request at this time."<sup>49</sup> As a result, the Koreans had to dispatch its troops to save face from the U.S. forces' pressure.

Realizing this dispatch would be inevitable, General Chae attempted to gain corresponding incentives from the U.S. forces. Here, Koreans showed the same motivation with their decision to participate in the Vietnam War: to gain more—economic and national security—benefits from the United States when sending troops to Vietnam was unavoidable. By accepting the U.S. forces' request, Chae could pursue both cause and benefits. Chae at first rejected Larsen's offer by raising the following reasons: "Our equipment is old fashioned, especially communication equipment is too old to work in the jungle; the ROK forces are not able to supply since the troop will act far from our TAOR; it would be hard to command and

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<sup>49</sup> Chae, *Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa na*, 309-310.

control the [dispatching] troop.”<sup>50</sup> Larsen counteroffered by promising that the United States would provide new communication equipment, AN/PRC-25 (radio), the 25th division would support and supply the ROK troops, and the 3d Brigade would have OPCON over the ROK troops.<sup>51</sup> Chae accepted this counteroffer, and on 4 July—ten days after receiving the first request—ROKFV notified the U.S. I Field Force of the agreement to send its troops to the Cambodia border.<sup>52</sup> As a result, on 6 July, the 3d Battalion of the Tiger Cavalry Regiment with two artillery batteries and one engineering platoon attached were selected as troops awaiting dispatch and standing by for leave.<sup>53</sup>

Although realizing they had to cooperate with the U.S. forces, General Chae was concerned that the risk of high casualties would bring a backlash in South Korea.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, even after his decision on putting the ROK dispatch troop under U.S. forces’ OPCON, Chae was involved in the employment plan of it. Maj. Seo Woo-in described that the S-3 staff of the Tiger Division had a hard time to meet General Chae’s point of view; Chae, several times, did not accept the dispatching troops’ operational plan which was designed by the ROK and U.S. Army officers.<sup>55</sup> Once the dispatch was decided, based on pursuing the minimum sacrifices realistic among their internal goal, Chae ordered the ROK dispatching troops to follow his direction to build company bases; even they were going to be under U.S. Army’s OPCON for the combined operation. With the confidence of the company base’s defense capability, Chae thought that way ROK forces could keep the casualties down.

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<sup>50</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol.1-2, 362-363

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>52</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 1-2, 367.

<sup>53</sup> Sudosadan, “Chönt’usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt’u,” HB00094.

<sup>54</sup> Seo Woo-in, author’s interview, 28 May 2018, Sönuga (Japanese Restaurant), Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

On the morning of 9 July, the Korean troops departed their territory Qui Nohn and started moving forward to Duc Co. Capt. Kim Jin-kyu, the 3d Battery commander of the 61 Artillery Battalion, wrote:

Moving out to the Cambodian border was, in many aspects, historic. It was meaningful including 240 kilometers motor march and establishment of unusual large battery in addition to the expectation of the enemy forces as North Vietnamese regular. Most of all, the expectation and attention from the Korean and allied countries' people who knew our dispatch through the domestic and international press reports, as well as the Tiger fellow soldiers, almost forced us to fight well.<sup>56</sup>

Against this 240 kilometers "tremendous" march with 16 kilometers long troop length in 187 trucks along Highway 19 based on the full support from the U.S. forces, Capt. Kim showed both admiration and concern. Luckily, they safely arrived in Duc Co without the enemy attack.<sup>57</sup> In some way, Korean troops' operation at Duc Co was the first time the U.S. and ROK forces combined operation in Vietnam. The U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division and the ROK Tiger 26th Regiment including tanks covered the flank of the ROK's line and the Battalion commander commanded led and control his troop from the helicopter. The U.S. 3d Brigade started to exercise OPCON over the attached Korean dispatching troops in Pleiku at 09:00 during their march on that day.<sup>58</sup> Also, the U.S. brigade and ROK regiment exchanged liaison officers for the Battalion's smooth cooperation.<sup>59</sup> Finally, the U.S. tank platoon was attached to the ROK 3d Battalion.<sup>60</sup> The assigned territory given to the Battalion was the jungle area of 13 kilometers

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<sup>56</sup> "Taewi kimjin'gyu sugi [Capt. Kim Jin-kyu Sugi Memoirs]," Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chōnt'umidam mit chōnhun* [The Collection of Battle Story and its Lesson], October 1965-November 1967, HB02453.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; For more details, see Lt. Col. Choi's memoir about the Battle of Duc Co. Sudosadan, "Chōnt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chōnt'u," HB00094.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.; Carland, *Combat Operations*, 292-297.

<sup>59</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awōl han'gukkun chōnsa*, vol. 1-2, 367.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

width from Cambodia border to Duc Co and 10 kilometers depth of highway 19 to Ia Pnon creek (Part of Ia Dran River).

However, the 3d Battalion commander, Lt. Col. Choi Byung-su faced difficulties from the different directions between the original and present commanders. He stated, “I, as a local commander, underwent many hardships because the operational guideline from ROKFV commander Chae was different from the direction of the [U.S.] operational commander Walker.”<sup>61</sup> General Walker ordered the Korean troops to find an enemy by making a line with the observation posts each consisting of four or five soldiers, against the enemy probable avenue of approach inside the area of operations, as well as by conducting search (reconnaissance and patrol) operations with their remaining units. Thus, when finding the enemy, he wanted the ROK troops to destroy them by the artillery fire or hold the enemy before the main forces’ arrival to fight.<sup>62</sup> It was a typical search and destroy concept, and therefore ROK forces had to employ quick reaction forces to destroy the enemy when finding them. In contrast, General Chae wanted his expedition forces to focus on the defense and control the assigned area by building company bases. Before ROK troop departure, Chae gave his directive to Lt. Col. Choi, “to develop two companies [on bases] with co-ordination and reserve one company base; to build company tactical bases and expand the pacified territory gradually; to set aside ammunition and food to stand over 72 hours against the enemy attack.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> “Chungnyöng ch’oebyöngsu sugi [Lt. Col. Choi Byung-su Memoir],” in Sudosadan, “Chönt’usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt’u,” HB00094; Choi Byung-su interview, 28 April 1978, *Chüngönl t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 379.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 1-2, 366.

Upon arriving, the ROK Battalion occupied and established defensive positions to the east of the hamlet of Plei Girao Kla, about eight kilometers south of Duc Co.<sup>64</sup> General Larsen described, “when the [ROK] battalion arrived it was divided into three separate company outposts and embarked on operations involving small unit patrols in all directions from each of the base camps.”<sup>65</sup> As soon as the Battalion started to build company bases, Brig. Gen. Walker ordered Lt. Col. Choi to execute a combat mission based on his direction. Against the U.S. commander’s order, ROK Battalion commander Choi’s decision was “to adapt the Brigade commander’s operational concept based on our commander’s guideline,” after getting ROKFV’s order “to execute the mission based on the operational concept of [ROK] Division but cooperate with the U.S. forces.”<sup>66</sup> Choi kept building company bases in three different places instead of employing the line of observation outposts. After building bases, his companies appeared to install observation outposts—in fact, two platoons went out for ambush—inside their territory reflecting Walker’s directive.<sup>67</sup> They also started a daily patrol based on Walker’s order to search carefully in a defined sector and destroy the enemy forces.

As a result, Lt. Col. Choi built company bases while, at the same time, executed the daily patrol and reconnaissance to find the enemy and made them ready to follow Walker’s order to carry out search and destroy operations. The ROK Battalion’s operational direction was, “each company must execute daily day and night ambush by two platoons and occasional company-size patrol and reconnaissance.”<sup>68</sup> This was Choi’s compromise by prioritizing General Chae’s direction and not disobeying General Walker. At the same time, Choi tried to obtain ammunition

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam*, 140-141.

<sup>66</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 1-2, 366.

<sup>67</sup> “Chungnyöng ch’oeb’yöngsu sugi,” in “Sudosadan, Chönt’usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt’u,” HB00094.

<sup>68</sup> Sudosadan, “Chönt’usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt’u,” HB00094.

and supplies for the bases from the U.S. Army to sustain the battalion for three days, despite being told to prepare only a basic load from Walker. For example, the ROK Battery commander, Capt. Kim had a difficult time to stock up the ammunition for artillery to the ROKFV's guideline of 450 rounds for the one 105mm howitzer since the U.S. Brigade's guideline was 150 rounds for each, but Kim prepared to the best of his ability between the two different guidelines.<sup>69</sup> As a result, ROK Battalion was not able to stock up enough ammunition to meet the ROKFV's guideline but had more than the U.S. guideline in addition to getting a promise from Walker to receive those shells within two hours upon request during the battle.

However, the ROK Battalion did not get serious results from their month-long daily patrol; in fact, Koreans performed small-scale operations many times—147 reconnaissance and patrol and 385 ambush—until the Battle of Duc Co.<sup>70</sup> In his trip to Duc Co, General Westmoreland perceived the Korean troops “[just] digging in and getting set along the Cambodian border.”<sup>71</sup> The 9th Company commander, Capt. Lee Chun-geun, said that after his company shifted the 11th Company to Duc Co on 27 July, two platoons performed patrol and ambush, and another remained to strengthen the base. Capt. Lee ordered to strengthen the base and construct covered foxholes for three days.<sup>72</sup> Korean soldiers built the base by using mainly a shovel, which was different from the engineer supported base building inside their original TAOR. One soldier wrote, “despite the lack of materials and tools, I lifted a shovel, reminding the platoon leader’s order to build the base well by exercising the skill we have learned so far.”<sup>73</sup> Walker was displeased with the Korean soldiers’ base building without making a result. When

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<sup>69</sup> “Taewi kimjin'gyu sugi,” in *Chǒnt'umidam mit chǒnhun*, HB02453.

<sup>70</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 297; Sudosadan, “Chǒnt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chǒnt'u,” HB00094.

<sup>71</sup> General Westmoreland’s Historical Briefing, 17 July 1966, Reel 7, Papers of Westmoreland (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>72</sup> Sudosadan, “Chǒnt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chǒnt'u,” HB00094.

<sup>73</sup> “Hasa igyuch'ŏl sugi [Sergeant Lee Gyucheol Memoir],” in *Chǒnt'umidam mit chǒnhun*, HB02453.

Walker visited Lee's company, he scolded Capt. Lee, thinking that ROK's company was building the base because they had nothing to do and were neglecting the assigned patrol.<sup>74</sup> The 1st Platoon Leader of the 11th Company, 1st Lt. Pyo Myōng-ryōl reminisced that 9th Company's constructing covered foxholes in the base did not make any sense from the military perspective since this mobile operation required them to move from base to base. He added, "American soldiers mocked us that 'Tigers (Tiger Division) were losing their teeth and dug into the ground like a mole.'" <sup>75</sup> However, the ROK forces' company base soon proved its strength in the real battle.

At 22:40 on 10 August, approximately 700 North Vietnamese troops attacked the 9th Company's base. After hearing mine explosions, which were not taken seriously by the soldiers, a sentry on guard reported the sound of footsteps and the 9th Company commander, Capt. Lee, ordered the attached U.S. tank platoon to turn on the searchlights in that direction. They then realized that it was the enemy troops assaulting the ROK base.<sup>76</sup> Since most company members slept, being tired from two days in a row of reconnaissance and patrol, it was an unexpected surprise attack for the 9th company, and ninety percent of their casualties occurred by the enemy mortar fire during the ten minutes of the initial phase.<sup>77</sup> Sergeant Kim Hong-ki said, "This time it was not gunshots. When mortar shells dropped all around us, we became so panicky."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Lee Chun-geun interview, 29 November 1978, *Chūngōnūl t'onghae pon pet 'ūnam chōnjaenggwa han 'gukkun*, vol.1, 384

<sup>75</sup> Pyo Myōng-ryōl, "Sangshige ōgūnnan 'ch'amho'ka pyōngsadūrūl kuhada [Trenches not in accordance with Common Sense Saved Soldiers]," *OhmyNews*, 20 September 2006.  
[http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0000361161](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0000361161) (accessed 10 March 2019).

<sup>76</sup> "Hasa Kang Joong-gil sugi [Sergeant Lee Gyuchool Memoir]," in *Chōnt'umidam mit chōnhun*, HB02453; "Chungwi Im Bok-man sugi [Lt. Im Bok-man Memoir]," in *Ibid.* The U.S. tank platoon of five tanks was attached to the company on 11 July 1966.

<sup>77</sup> Sudosadan, "Chōnt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chōnt'u," HB00094.

<sup>78</sup> "Hasa Pak Yōngpok sugi [Sergeant Park Young-bok Memoir]," in *Chōnt'umidam mit chōnhun*, HB02453.

Although soldiers immediately prepared for combat, they were indeed in chaos by the enemy attack.

It was the leadership and soldier's mental and training preparation which saved the 9th Company by overcoming initial chaos. First, most soldiers "resolutely" fought against the enemy during the battle. Being dispatched as a unit, they had a strong cohesion as well as being under perfect discipline. Each individual soldier even had the ability to request artillery.<sup>79</sup> For example, Sgt. Park Jae-young quickly requested an artillery fire when others could not move out of the trench to the radio because of the shells. His request was even earlier than the Forward Observer (FO), Lt. Han Kwang-duck's taking action, and three minutes after of Park's request, ROK's artillery hit the enemy, which "played the decisive role to weaken the enemy attack."<sup>80</sup> Second, officers and squad leaders demonstrated their leadership. One soldier wrote: "When we were in chaos watching fellow soldiers falling down from the enemy surprise attack, it was our platoon leader who shouted us to shoot and respond to the enemy. We were able to calm down and station into the position of the trench following the platoon leader's direction."<sup>81</sup> When Company commander Capt. Lee went out of the trench and shouted, "Stand or die. We are going to do hand-to-hand fight," during the battle, strengthened his soldiers' resolve to fight on.<sup>82</sup>

The 9th Company kept repelling the enemy attack. In addition to the support of artillery fire, the attached U.S. tank platoon of five tanks and ROK's mortar and machine-gun platoon also played an important role. Around 02:00, three hours after the initial attack, the enemy forces attack became weakened and the fight became a lull in most of the area. At about 05:40, the 9th

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<sup>79</sup> Sudosadan, "Chönt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt'u," HB00094.

<sup>80</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa*, vol. 1-2, 375.

<sup>81</sup> "Hasa Yoo In-hak sugi [Sergeant Yoo In-hak Memoir]," in *Chönt'umidam mit chönhun*, HB02453.

<sup>82</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa*, vol. 1-2, 376.

Company completely repelled the North Vietnamese troops, after the enemy's final attempt from the South to the 2d Platoon area.<sup>83</sup> As a result, the Korean company defeated North Vietnamese regular troops who were five times their size: at least 197 North Vietnamese were killed, while Koreans lost only seven men.<sup>84</sup> This was the battle where the ROK base was attacked by non-guerilla forces for the first time. Under the enemy's surprise attack, the 9th company did not collapse but instead prevailed. At 06:10 on the next morning, General Walker visited the place and ordered the Battalion commander Choi not to bury the North Vietnamese bodies because "nobody would believe this [result] unless seeing the bodies."<sup>85</sup>

The Battle of Duc Co, beyond dispute, has been regarded as one of ROK's most tremendous and well-known victories in the Vietnam War.<sup>86</sup> Regarding the key for success, the U.S. and ROK forces emphasized slightly different perspectives: firepower for the U.S. and a company base concept for the ROK Army. ROK's after-action report firstly cited, "the fundamental success factor was from the excellency of the concept of the [company] base which had been initially emphasized and executed as our policy."<sup>87</sup> Then, it listed artillery fire and well-trained soldiers as well as officer's leadership for their success factors. In contrast, the U.S. Army official history of the Vietnam War explained that this was a "clear victory by firepower," stating "artillery from American and South Korean bases fired nearly nineteen hundred high-explosive rounds."<sup>88</sup> Even one ROK soldier supported the idea that fire support and flare actually

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<sup>83</sup> Sudosadan, "Chönt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt'u," HB00094.

<sup>84</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 298-299.

<sup>85</sup> "Taewi kimjin'gyu sugi, *Chönt'umidam mit chōnhun*, HB02453.

<sup>86</sup> "Maengho 240 myōnge mugonghunjang [The 240 Tigers Receiving the Military Merit]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 25 1966 August; "Chonsūni tarajunūn mi ūnsōngmugonghunjang [U.S. Silver Star Medal from President Johnson]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 28 October 1966. About 240 of every participant in this battle received the military merit from the General Chae, and the company commander being awarded the Silver Star Medal from the U.S. Army.

<sup>87</sup> Sudosadan, "Chönt'usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chönt'u," HB00094.

<sup>88</sup> Carland, *Combat Operations*, 298-299.

saved them: “Our artillery fire hit the enemy area, and due to the flare the battlefield was bright enough to see small ants.”<sup>89</sup> In fact, ROK troops were able to repel the enemy without significant hand-to-hand combat, owing to the firepower that had already weakened the enemy.

Nonetheless, the success of this battle was based on the combination of all related factors. Persistent defense based on base and firepower worked together, as one U.S. document stated, “the small Allied Forces put up a valiant defense while the tanks and artillery ripped the enemy ranks with continuous fire.”<sup>90</sup> If there were no solid defense and prepared fire plan based on ROK’s base concept, firepower could not have been activated effectively, and soldiers would not have been able to respond calmly in the confused and urgent situation. In the same way, if there were no fire support, ROK’s base would not have survived against the overwhelming enemy attack. Moreover, even with a solid base and superior firepower, the 9th Company would have been devastated without individual soldier’s fighting spirit, will, and preparedness for combat.

The ROKFV’s after-action report on this battle wrote:

Although we have to avoid the passiveness on the other operations due to focusing too much on the base defense, the first requirement for the military operation is to defend and secure the base. This is the invariable principle, and the importance of building a solid base became much more evident especially uncertain areas [like at Duc Co].<sup>91</sup>

This remark rather implicated the ROKFV’s nervousness on their company base’s defense capability. Even though this report concluded that the Battle of Duc Co “was the most representative case of success in the defense of the company base which showed off the Korean combat capability,” internally, it listed several problems with their performance during this

<sup>89</sup> “Hasa Pak Yōngpok sugi [Sergeant Park Young-bok Memoir],” in *Chōnt’umidam mit chōnhun*, HB02453.

<sup>90</sup> Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report, “Operation Paul Revere / Sam Houston,” 27 July 1967, a485207, DTIC.

<sup>91</sup> Sudosadan, “Chōnt’usangbo che 41 ho: Duc Co chōnt’u,” HB00094.

battle.<sup>92</sup> According to the after-action report: 1. If the enemy kept attacking after 02:00, the company could have collapsed because of the lack of artillery shells in the impossible situation of receiving additional shell supplies from the U.S. 3d Brigade during the battle because of the bad weather, and the Korean soldiers approached the breaking point; 2. As a result of the company's not operating night ambush or watching post outside of the base on that night, it easily allowed the enemy surprise attack; 3. The organization of different kinds of bullets in the trench became problematic; 4. The company commander misunderstood the enemy main direction from the south, which was in fact from the west. The 2nd Platoon in the South, who lost a platoon leader during the battle, gave an exaggerated report about the enemy size; 5. Cooperation with the platoons was not good.<sup>93</sup>

A piece of luck, indeed, played a part in this success. The ROK base could have collapsed even if just one fact went wrong. The after-action report assumed that the enemy forces attacked the ROK base based on their assumption that base forces were weakened because the company had left for patrol and reconnaissance. During the two days, only one platoon from the Battalion reserve, the 11th Company and attached platoon of mortar and machine-gun, defended the base.<sup>94</sup> Although ROK soldiers were sleeping before the enemy attack, they were lucky to have the full force of the company with additional attached troops in the base. The company commander's arbitrary decision not to send two platoons for the night ambush on that night, on the contrary, helped the base defense in terms of the defense strength.<sup>95</sup> The report also wrote about the enemy's mistakes, such as choosing an inappropriate direction for the main attack in

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Lee Chun-geun interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 385. In this testimony, he disobeyed the Battalion Commander's order to send an ambush at that night.

terms of the terrain and ROK's defense. Many of the enemy's initial mortar shells were also blind shells. The report continued that the enemy lost several chances to break the Korean defense during the battle. As a result, the ROKFV itself did not seem to have one-hundred percent guarantee of the outcome of this battle. This "brilliant" success might have ended with "irreversible" failure of the company base concept under the U.S. forces' critical observation. Despite the brilliant victory at Duc Co, ROKs, internally, realized a limitation and risk of the self-defense of the company base.

As General Chae wrote in his memoir, ROKFV emphasized the dual purpose of their company base concept during the Vietnam War:

The initial success of the company tactical base concept was to force the enemy not to dare attack our bases through perfect guard and defense. The second success was to pacify the area by separating VC from the civilian and destroying them through the civil-affairs and psychological operations based on company bases. Simply, we should develop the civil-affairs operations through the military aids with the perfect defense of the base.<sup>96</sup>

Idealistically, Koreans were pursuing success in both unconventional and conventional war by adopting company bases. However, the reality was different from the ideal. During the Vietnam War, ROK forces were confronted with an inconsistency in the actual application of company-size bases. It was not that simple for the troops to maintain a balance between the company base's main function of supporting pacification operations while at the same time conducting defensive operations.

Although Co Tac Base was an indispensable tactic for the Korean pacification operation, each subordinate unit including the infantry company was over-burdened for this task, since each

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<sup>96</sup> Chae, *Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa na*, 202-203.

company took on a vast area for responsibility. Although ROK troop strength reached about 49,000 in 1967 owing to the 9th Division's arrival in late 1966, each company's assigned tactical area of responsibility was still very extensive since the ROK's overall TAOR itself had been expanded to—1,535 square kilometers (population of 310,000) in 1965, 4,470 square kilometers (970,000) in 1966, and 6,800 square kilometers (1,200,000) in 1967.<sup>97</sup> Lt. Col. Ji wrote, “the company base is an unavoidable concept to control many people and secure vast areas with only 30,000 combat troops in 1967.” “One rifle company has to secure about 70 square kilometers,” and “currently ROK's TAOR has been expanded to the limit with combat troops of Blue Dragon, Tiger and White Horse.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, companies had to move from area to area for pacification efforts during the war. Once an area was pacified, the ROK company moved on to another after handing the pacified area over to South Vietnamese PF and RF.<sup>99</sup> This way, ROKFV was able to expand the pacified territory. When it comes to focusing on the pacification operations, a ROK company base had to be more mobile and had to be built close enough to control a population, rather than becoming a passive fortification on an isolated hill.

Despite its main purpose of pacification, Co Tac Base should also be a strong base able at most to self-defend against a regimental-size enemy attack. Moreover, it was required to serve as a trap to entice the enemy to attack the base and destroy it.<sup>100</sup> Accordingly, a company base should always be ready to respond to an enemy attack. The ideal defense area for each company base was 16 square kilometers considering the company possessed an 81 mm mortar and a maximum of 90 square kilometers considering the range of 105 mm howitzer of its artillery fire

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<sup>97</sup> *Chuwölgun chönt'ujewön* [The Combat Data of ROKFV] (Saigon: Chuwölsa, 1969), 1; Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllumjön chonghap yön'gu*, 151.

<sup>98</sup> ROK Armed Forces Staff College, Lt. Col. Ji Deok-geon, “Wöllumjönesöüi han'gukkun chönsurüi t'adangsöng yöbu [Questions for the Validity of the Tactic of the ROK Forces in the Vietnam War],” 1967, HB02032.

<sup>99</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllumjön chonghap yön'gu*, 740-743.

<sup>100</sup> Ji, “Wöllumjönesöüi han'gukkun chönsurüi t'adangsöng yöbu,” HB02032.

support.<sup>101</sup> However, according to the ROKFV's memorandum to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff, most of the base in the 9th Division "occupied the TAOR beyond their capability."<sup>102</sup> Most of ROK company bases occupied an area too large to defend by themselves. For example, in August 1967, the largest TAOR of the company was 166 square kilometers, and the smallest was 13 square kilometers, and the average was 44 square kilometers in the White Horse Division.<sup>103</sup> Significantly, the Division's TAOR had narrow width and long length along the road. Col. Son commented, "as many soldiers as possible are needed to secure the area of 240 kilometers in-depth, stabilize people, and open the Highway 1 so that transport and people can run between south and north."<sup>104</sup> Thus, "each company has to control at least a depth of some ten kilometers," which could be vulnerable to any enemy serious attack.<sup>105</sup>

Moreover, as the Battle of Duc Co proved, a successful defense of a base was not decided by only one factor, but various engagement aspects were required, such as tactical advantages of terrain; strength and fire powers of the base; discipline, training level, and morale of soldiers; defense plan and leadership. Bases often became vulnerable when they focused more on pacification: taking responsibility on the vast area; moving a base one area of operations to another; giving up the advantage of terrain for the defense by considering building in a strategically important place; causing a gap in defense ability when more soldiers left the base for pacification and other small-scale operations.

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<sup>101</sup> "Chönsulch'aegimjiyöök nölbie taehan charyo [Materials about the Size of TAOR]," 26 August 1967, in *Chuwölsa kyoribalchön charyo* [Materials for the Development of Doctrine in ROKFV], 1967, HB01684.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, 2 September 1968, *Chüngönl t'onghae pon pet'ünam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 114-115.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 115.

There were instances that ROK company bases were seriously damaged from enemy attacks.<sup>106</sup> Of two cases during the ROK's largest and most "successful" operation, Operation Oh Jac Kyo, was most representative: On 10 April, the 11th Company of 28th Regiment, White Horse Division, suffered 34 casualties (12 KIA); On 16 May, the 2nd Company of 26th Regiment, Tiger Division suffered 58 casualties (18 KIA).<sup>107</sup> Even though these incidents were not exposed to the public, ROKFV internally took them seriously. At first, ROKFV took soldiers' lack of preparation related to their low discipline as the cause of the failure. Both bases failed in vigilance. The Chief of the ROKFV Combat Development, Col. Kim Chi-ho, who investigated these failures, stated, "the 2nd Company received a surprise attack because everyone was sleeping without any preparation for the alert."<sup>108</sup> More fundamentally, ROKFV judged that the Korean troops were full of conceit from their continuous successes, including Operation Oh Jac Kyo had a feeling that the Viet Cong would not dare to attack them. The fear and nervousness that they had in the early time were gone, and the soldiers' discipline was loosened from being intoxicated by the joy of victory.<sup>109</sup> Col. Kim described, "Because of the pride for their success [of linking-up operation at Operation Oh Jac Kyo], they became unguarded. Some troops conducted false ambushes which were only conducted as a plan, and even in the real ambushes, soldiers often slept."<sup>110</sup>

However, ROKFV faced the drawback of the company base concept, which was not easy to be offset by the soldiers' morale and discipline. First, it became vulnerable to the defense

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<sup>106</sup> Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu, *Wŏllamjŏn chonghap yŏn'gu*, 740-743; Chae Myung-shin, *Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa na*, 422; These failures were overshadowed by the success of Operation Oh Jac Kyo.

<sup>107</sup> Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P'awŏl han'gukkun chŏnsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol. 2 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1981), 499; *Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>108</sup> Kim Chi-ho interview, 18 July 1980, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 142.

<sup>109</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awŏl han'gukkun chŏnsa*, vol. 2, 508-509.

<sup>110</sup> Kim Chi-ho interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 141-142.

when building in strategically oriented positions, such as along the road and close to the village, and therefore giving up the tactical advantage. Second, the weakness of the company base was revealed: It was easy to receive a surprise attack from the enemy when it lacked the alert. Third, it was not easy for one company to control the vast area. Fourth, since ROK company bases moved frequently, their foxhole, trench, and the support from the upper troop were not perfect. Also, staying long in one area caused a problem because the enemy forces would get enough information to attack the ROK base. Col. Kim Chi-ho retrospected, “When I went to the scene of the attacked 11th Company’s base, the base was on the flat [not on the hill], the road passed through the center of the base, and they had one watchtower next to the road—if the enemy wanted to launch a surprise attack, they could have done so easily.”<sup>111</sup> He continued, “the 2nd Company’s situation was worse than the 11th Company... they were devastated beyond words.”<sup>112</sup> Kim concluded, “These incidents deeply embarrassed ROKFV. We hid them because they were a sense of shame and we have to consider soldiers’ morale... It can’t be helped. Everyone tends to reveal only a good result and hide a failure. Therefore, only successful cases are well written in our history.”<sup>113</sup>

Nonetheless, ROKFV, who regarded these as a serious issue, started to inspect their company bases, mainly focusing on the capability for the defense. The ROKFV’s official evaluation of ROK company bases, immediately after these incidents, revealed the actual condition of all company bases. For example, in the report of the inspection of the 9th Division’s company bases in May 1967 revealed, “most of the company bases we visited were located inland and primarily focused on blocking enemy infiltration rather than protecting a certain

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 142

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 142-143.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

population and securing an area.”<sup>114</sup> It was not in concert with the ROK tactical manual’s guidelines that company bases should be situated close to the village for its pacification role, and therefore the tactical advantage should not be a priority for the location rather than for strategic consideration. In reality, “12 bases were on flat land and 12 places were on the high ground among the 24 company bases in the Division.”<sup>115</sup> Moreover, the main content of this report was about the bases’ defense ability rather than their contribution to pacification efforts. The evaluation focused on the defense capability of such a base including its location, defensive methods (early warning system), fortification, fire support, and discipline and morale of soldiers.<sup>116</sup>

Defending a company base was always a sensitive and serious issue to ROKFV, and a successful defense of such a base was a major burden for the Korean commanding officers. In July 1967, Lt. Col. Seo Woo-in became a battalion commander of the 3rd Battalion which had 11th Company whose base had ravaged a few months ago. Lt. Col. Seo delineated that it took a long time to restore the spirits of his battalion since his soldiers had low morale and a sense of defeat after the failure of the defense. Seo said that commanders could not guarantee one hundred percent that their respective companies were able to defend their bases successfully.<sup>117</sup>

As a result, in reality, focusing on both functions and achieving a balance in company bases was not easy. Achieving a balance of both involved a risk. Considering the ROKFV’s internal goal of maximum results with minimum casualties, maximum results by successful pacification through employing the base was close to the cause of their participation of the war,

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<sup>114</sup> “Chungdae chönsul kiji pangmun kyölgwa [The Result of the Inspection of the 9th Division’s Company Bases],” May 23 to May 25, 1967, in Chuwölsa, *Chungdaejönsulgijjaryo*, HB01685.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Seo Woo-in, author’s interview.

and moreover, measuring success in pacification and related efforts was abstract and hard to grasp. Meanwhile, not causing unnecessary casualties by defending the base well was more realistic and sensitive to the Korean troops rather than achieving maximum results by a successful pacification of local populations. Moreover, ROKFV promoted Co Tac Bases' role for the conventional type of the war, during 1967 and 1968 when allied forces focused on large-scale offensive operations, by emphasizing the base's aggressive role as a foothold to launch offensive operations, as well as destroying the enemy after luring them into attacking the base.<sup>118</sup> As ROK tactics were admitted by the U.S. forces to be excellent, they were able to promote the company base concept as useful for the offensive. To do this, ROK's bases had to be strong enough to endure the enemy all-out attack. As a result, a successful defense became a more important and realistic matter than a success in pacification efforts in terms of operating company bases.

This proclivity, focusing more on defense rather than pacification efforts, became more prevalent as the Vietnam War progressed. Lt. Col. Lee Jae-tae, S-3 (Operations) officer of the 1st Regiment of the Capital Division who had previously experienced the war as a company commander from 1965 to 1966, wrote in his 18 October 1971 diary:

Recent [company] bases are built for permanent settlement. Bases are built on a large scale with ample labor and materials, using bulldozers to fortify a barrier. Do we really have to do this? When we first came here [in 1965], bases were not for settlement. At that time, after we stabilized the territory and we moved to secure another territory. In my case, the company base moved eight times in the twelve months of my term as a company commander. ... Now there are no new areas to pacify, bases are always in the same place.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ji, "Wöllamjōnesōüi han'gukkun chōnsurüi t'adangsōng yōbu," HB02032; "MACV Commanders' Conference 24 September 1967," VNCA.

<sup>119</sup> Lee Jae-tae. *Kasūmül ttulk'o kan chōkt'an, Kunbokūn pukke p'iro multūlgo* [Enemy Bullet Pierced the Chest, the Uniform was Blood-drenched] (Seoul: Chōnt'ongjokpo munhwasa, 2014), 389.

As a result of the emphasis on security during the Vietnamization phase in which other allied forces were withdrawing and the war became stalemated without significant battles, company bases—which had been used as an important foothold in the South Koreans’ pacification operations—began to be used primarily for defense. Thus, bases, indeed, became permanent fortifications during Vietnamization. The U.S. criticism that Koreans went to Vietnam not for the fighting but for the defense of its assigned territory in the ROK’s early participation of the war, was realized during this period.

Based on ROK’s actual conduct during the Vietnam War, employing company bases was a not a strategy in itself, rather it was a tactic which followed ROKFV’s strategic emphasis on its conduct of the pacification operations and the reality of the war. Although this tactical strategy was not always employed following its original ideal, which should have focused more on a strategic level of the pacification, the company base as ROK’s most important and unique tactical method remained so unabated for as long as ROKFV remained an active participant in the war.



Figure 7. The 6th Company Base, The Tiger 1st Regiment, Date Unknown. Photo courtesy of VietVet Veterans of Korea.<sup>120</sup>



<sup>120</sup>[http://www.vietvet.co.kr/technote/read.cgi?board=photo&x\\_number=1145407196&r\\_search=%C0%FC%BC%FA%B1%E2%C1%F6&nnew=1](http://www.vietvet.co.kr/technote/read.cgi?board=photo&x_number=1145407196&r_search=%C0%FC%BC%FA%B1%E2%C1%F6&nnew=1) (accessed 14 March 2019).

Figure 8. The 2nd Company Base, The Blue Dragon 1st Battalion, 1971. Photo courtesy of VietVet Veterans of Korea.<sup>121</sup>

### **Between a Political and Professional Army: Implications of the ROKFV's Conduct in 1966**

Despite the U.S. forces' dissatisfaction with the Koreans for not following their operational concept, ROK forces gradually but successfully stabilized and secured its assigned TAOR during their first phase after the arrival. At the beginning of 1966, ROKFV self-evaluated its achievement: "After completely finishing the enemy's organized resistance in the TAOR at this moment, we are ready to move from the defensive to the offensive period."<sup>122</sup> As its assigned area became stabilized, the ROK Capital (Tiger) Division started to move into the second and third phase of the war plan from early 1966, which meant that ROK forces to be more offensive and aggressive by destroying VC and its bases. Accordingly, the number of big unit operations, not only battalion but also including regimental-level, started to increase. Operation Biho (Flying Tiger) 3 on 3 January 1966 was the Tiger Division's first battalion-level operation. On 7 January, the 1st and 2nd Battalion of the 1st Tiger Regiment launched Operation Flying Tiger 5 and continued to Operation Flying Tiger 6. In these series of operations, the Tiger 1st Regiment "was succeeded in striking the VC battalion-size decisively after seizing them."<sup>123</sup> From 23 to 26 March of 1966, the Tiger Division conducted its first division-level offensive operation, Operation Maengho (Tiger) 5 to expand the division's TAOR in addition to attempting to seize control of Go Boi flat area, the grain belt of the Eastern Coast of South

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<sup>121</sup>[http://www.vietvet.co.kr/technote/read.cgi?board=photo&x\\_number=1163852594&r\\_search=%C0%FC%BC%FA%B1%E2%C1%F6&nnew=1](http://www.vietvet.co.kr/technote/read.cgi?board=photo&x_number=1163852594&r_search=%C0%FC%BC%FA%B1%E2%C1%F6&nnew=1) (accessed 14 March 2019).

<sup>122</sup> Chuwōlsa, *Chōnt'umidam mit chōnhun*, HB02453.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*; Kukpangbu, *P'awōl han 'gukkun chōnsa*, vol. 1-1, 369.

Vietnam. As a result of destroying the VC in the surrounding area, the division succeeded in expanding 200 square kilometers of the TAOR and seizing control part of this flat area.<sup>124</sup>

ROK's launch of large-scale combat operations in 1966 was driven by political as well as military motivation based on their phased plan. The Korean forces, in many ways, exercised another concept of politically oriented war in Vietnam: even a single combat operation had political considerations. This conduct was not only from their understanding of the nature of the Vietnam War, which was more political than military conflict, and thus should focus more on the pacification operations. But it was also from their pursuit of an internal goal of achieving maximum benefits with minimum efforts, especially in the relationship with the U.S. forces. Since the first phase for their adjustment of the new battlefield was over, the ROK forces no longer had a pretext for remaining passive. Against U.S. criticism, the Koreans wanted to save face in consideration of national prestige and the relationship with the U.S. forces.

Saving face and promoting themselves as capable allied troops in Vietnam while seeking their own interest became the Korean forces' tendency: ROKFV tried to self promote from the result of their combat operations outside. In his announcement of guidance in early 1966, General Chae "especially emphasized the need for offensive combat operations, suggesting [conducting] large-scale operations once a month in order to show off our power to the Viet Cong, and that offense itself also can be the best defense."<sup>125</sup> This remark functioned as more rhetoric than an imperative order, considering ROKFV's actual number and size of large-scale offensive operations afterward. Some ROK officers' oral testimonies suggested that Koreans tend to count more enemy fatalities for the outcome and fewer number of friendly casualties, for

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<sup>124</sup> Han Min-sök interview, August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 126-127.

<sup>125</sup> Chuwŏlsa, *Chŏnt'umidam mit chŏnhun* [The Collection of Battle Story and its Lesson], HB02453.

their official record of combat operations.<sup>126</sup> As discussed before, to reduce the risk, General Chae was cautious and deliberate in launching large-scale combat operations; but when they had to do it, Chae wanted his troops to achieve a significant result with the fewest casualties. As a result, sometimes ROK units overstated their outcome while reporting fewer casualties in their conduct of combat operations.

Meanwhile, General Chae, internally expressed concern about ROK forces' high kill ratio in the combat operations.<sup>127</sup> He said, "high kill ratio is more worrisome than doing [achieving] nothing."<sup>128</sup> Chae ordered the commanders not to obsess about the military outcome and reexamined the high kill-ratio outcome by sending inspectors. This was based on his belief that the Vietnam War was a political war where winning the heart and minds of people was foremost important. The military outcome should be regarded as less important in this political conflict, and moreover, high kill-ratio could be seen as killing civilians, leading to unnecessary destruction. In this regard, ROK forces did not use a "body count" as a measuring system like the U.S. Army and mainly regarded captured arms as their outcome. Generally, one captured rifle equaled three Viet Cong.<sup>129</sup> This military gain sometimes caused side effects such as justifying their passiveness and committing illegal purchase of weapons from the black market to fabricate the outcome. Overall, it was a reasonable method considering the political situation and nature of the warfare in which to differentiate the combatants and non-combatants was difficult. As a result, Chae's guideline could be controversially requiring his soldiers to be aggressive and

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<sup>126</sup> Kim Sun-hyön interview, 4 February 1970, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 141.

<sup>127</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 89-90.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>129</sup> *Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu* [Headquarters of ROKFV], "Hullyŏng [Directives]," January 1967, HB02151; Kim Sun-hyön interview, 4 February 1970, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 141; Jeon Seong-gak interview, 25 October 1966, *Ibid.*, 424.

valiant outwardly, while internally restricting their aggressiveness. For ROK combat troops, the Vietnam War was another weird political war.

In late September, ROKFV launched Operation Tiger 6, a “typical” search and destroy operation depending on U.S. helicopters and firepower support. For the Koreans, it was the longest, 48 days from 23 September to 9 November, and the largest size of the operation employing actual troops of four battalions by that time.<sup>130</sup> Yet, this ROKFV’s representative search and destroy operation in 1966 exemplified ROK forces’ motivation for its conduct of large-scale operations which included both political and military aspects. During 1966, there were considerable structural changes in the ROK forces. In April, the Capital Division finally became a full-size division with the Tiger 26th Regiment’s arrival. This reinforcement allowed the division to mobilize enough troops into a large-scale combat operation from their mission of securing the assigned area. In August, Maj. Gen. Yoo Byung-hyun became a commander of the Capital Division, replacing General Chae, who was promoted to Lieutenant General, thus being emancipated from the dual hat of ROKFV and division commander.<sup>131</sup> Foremost, ROKFV was scheduled to be a corps size (about 45,000 troops) in October, with the 9th Division’s reinforcement arrival.

During mid-1966, ROKFV faced harsh criticism from the U.S. forces when the two forces’ conflict became high, surrounding the issue of how to employ the 9th Division. With having its structural change, ROKFV needed to save its face before the U.S. and South

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<sup>130</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, “1966 nyŏndo chuwŏl han’gukkun chakchŏn’gaeyo mit 1967 nyŏndo chŏnyŏkkyehoek pogosŏ,” HB02338.

<sup>131</sup> Yoo who was fluent in English graduating from the U.S. Armor School and CGSC and was proficient in conventional military doctrine with a career of superintendent of ROK Armor School. Chae’s promotion prompted General Westmoreland to promote Maj. Gen. Larsen to Lieutenant General. Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV, The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2006), 346

Vietnamese forces. Accordingly, ROKFV promoted its' activeness and aggressiveness to the outside, saying, "[We are] stepping up of the fight from this fall when a new Korean infantry division arrived in Vietnam."<sup>132</sup> As discussed before, responding to the U.S. request to send a ROK battalion to Duc Co on the Cambodian border from late June to early August, was following this purpose. In his first meeting with Lt. Gen. Larsen in August, the new Capital Division commander, Maj. Gen. Yoo, felt pressure to launch all-out offensive operations, as Larsen urged him to do so, while expressing the complaint on the ROK division's passiveness, saying "my wish is to attack the Pu Cat mountain area where the allied forces had never entered; with the United States, South Vietnam, and South Korean forces when the Tiger Division is ready."<sup>133</sup> In fact, General Chae had offered the combined operation in March to attack the Mt. Phu Cat area, but this combined operation had been delayed due to the U.S. I Field Forces' focus on the operations on the Cambodian border.<sup>134</sup>

In September, the Koreans decided to launch the operation on their own instead of the combined operation with the U.S. forces. The assistant chief of staff for the operations (G-3) of the Tiger Division, Lt. Col. Park Kwang-ök explained the reason: "This decision was a matter of our honor. The Korean troops had been criticized for not fighting aggressively, although we had stayed a year in Vietnam. We did have our own pride, and the area of Mt. Phu Cat (900 meters) was just next to our TAOR and was influencing our area."<sup>135</sup> In addition to this political consideration, militarily ROKFV needed to launch this operation: Mt. Phu Cat area was regarded

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<sup>132</sup> "South Korea Expects to Step Up Viet Fighting," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 1966.

<sup>133</sup> Yoo Byung-hyun, *Yoo Byung-hyun chasöjön* [Yoo Byung-hyun Autobiography] (Seoul: Chogapchedat'öm, 2013), 101-102.

<sup>134</sup> John M. Carland, *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2000), 236-237; *Ibid.*, 275-289.

<sup>135</sup> Park Kwang-ök interview, 30 October 1966, *Chüngönül t'onghae pon pet'ünam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 417.

as a foothold of VC influencing the Korean region and thus to destroy the main enemy forces in this area was important to secure and stabilize ROK's TAOR.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, as General Westmoreland mentioned, it was advantageous to conduct combat operations in the summer and early fall before the monsoons started in November.<sup>137</sup> In many ways, launching this operation was necessary for the Koreans.

In this new atmosphere, the Tiger division planned to conduct the operation for the first time outside of its TAOR. Since it would be a large-scale search and destroy operation attacking the stronghold of the VC main forces, ROKs worried from the beginning about their predictable high casualties.<sup>138</sup> Accordingly, following the direction from General Chae, the Division commander, General Yoo, paid attention to achieving results while minimizing casualties. The Tiger Division planned a clearing operation inside the occupied blockade by utilizing maximum U.S. support such as the helicopter. The helicopter support was able to move troops into the line of interdiction behind the mountain area and the starting line for the search mission.<sup>139</sup> It was based on ROKs' operational concept of "seize and destroy," for a large-scale operation that prioritized the encircling operation. More specifically, this operation was designed as a typical "hare hunting," similar to the ROKA's counterinsurgency (COIN) operation in Mt. Jiri during the Korean War, except using helicopter mobility.

In actuality, the combat operations were conducted by small-scale units, as Yoo mentioned, "even large-scale operations were indeed conducted by the company size troops."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Sudosadan [The Capital Division], "Chõnt'usangbo che 49 ho: Maengho 6 ho [Combat After Action Report No. 41: Operation Tiger 6]," 1967, HB00104

<sup>137</sup> Park Kwang-õk interview, *Chũngõnũl t'onghae pon pet'ũnam chõnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 418; Carland, *Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966*, 256.

<sup>138</sup> Sudosadan, "Chõnt'usangbo che 49 ho: Maengho 6 ho," HB00104.

<sup>139</sup> The operation was delayed for ten days due to the U.S. helicopter support situation. Park Kwang-õk interview, *Chũngõnũl t'onghae pon pet'ũnam chõnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 419.

<sup>140</sup> Yoo, *Yoo Byung-hyun chasõjõn*, 125.

Due to the terrain of the mountainous jungle, even the company operations had to be separated and dispersed into the platoon and squad. This operation convinced ROK forces that infantry's small-scale operation was the most vital for the combat operations in Vietnam and resulted in changing the structure of battalion to have four infantry companies by abolishing the fire company and changing it to the infantry one. They realized the fire company focusing on the conventional infantry combat was not very helpful in this kind of guerilla war in the jungle.<sup>141</sup>

This operation was also ROK's first major jungle and cave operation. One soldier wrote, "[only] one hour passed after moving through the foggy jungle. It was not easy to catch the VC hiding inside the jungle. If we were not careful, one of our soldiers would die. A nervous time went by."<sup>142</sup> Having so much uncertainty in the jungle forced soldiers to conduct hand-to-hand fights. Operation in the cave needs extraordinary courage since one or two soldiers had to enter the dark and uncertain place with their life. Lt. Kim Kil-boo, the 3rd Platoon Leader of the 10th Company, said that brave soldiers do not take any weapons except the grenade into the tunnel because the passage is too small and has various branches.<sup>143</sup> ROKFV found that the artillery fire was not very effective and helpful in this kind of operation.<sup>144</sup> Instead, it became an operation that individual soldiers one by one searched and destroyed the enemy soldiers.

For the first two or three days, ROK troops were not able to encounter the enemy and achieve results, mainly because the VC had already hidden or withdrawn inside the caves and tunnels, expecting Koreans to sweep and leave the area like Americans and South Vietnamese.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 119; Jeon Seong-gak interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet 'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han 'gukkun*, vol.1, 429; The 2nd Battalion commander of the 26th Tiger Regiment, Lt. Kim Ji-sung interview, 18 September 1978, Ibid., 464; The 8th Company commander, Capt. Lee Yong-yul interview, 12 October 1978, Ibid., 473.

<sup>142</sup> "Chungwi Kim Kiljoo Sugi [Lt. Kim Kil-joo Memoir]," in "Chŏnt'usangbo che 49 ho: Maengho 6 ho," HB00104.

<sup>143</sup> Kim Kil-boo interview, 30 October 1966, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet 'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han 'gukkun*, vol.1, 461-462.

<sup>144</sup> Jeon Seong-gak interview, Ibid., 429.

However, General Yoo ordered, instead of leaving the area of operation, “sit down and stay in the area and find the enemy.”<sup>145</sup> Accordingly, the Koreans continued search operations while occupying an outside blockade line of its operational area. ROK’s way of search operation was evaluated as different since they searched the same area or route again and again. After the third day, ROK started to find the VC. It was a surprise to the enemy, since they expected the Koreans would move back after searching one time: “Based on the thorough and repetitive search for 48 days, we were able to clear the enemy who hid underground or in caves, thinking we were leaving after the one search operation.”<sup>146</sup> The headquarters of ROKFV estimated their patience was the prime factor for their success: “the repetitive and persistent search of the area and caves led to a brilliant success.”<sup>147</sup> This persistent search became one of ROK’s representative tactics in the Vietnam War, in which the U.S. forces estimated ROKs as talented moles.<sup>148</sup>

Another distinguishing small-unit operation was conducted by the 9th Company of the 1st Regiment when the company climbed to the top of the mountain instead of being transported by helicopter. Even though it took more time and effort for the company, the Company commander, Capt. Yong Yŏng-il, decided to climb the rocky and densely forested mountain at night to bring a surprising impact to the enemy forces. They searched from top to bottom and gave a big surprise to the enemy who did not expect the Korean’s were coming down.<sup>149</sup> After Operation Tiger 6, The Regimental commander, Col. Jeon Seong-gak estimated that the 9th

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<sup>145</sup> Park Kwang-ŏk interview, Ibid, 419-420.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 419; Jeon Seong-gak interview, Ibid., 425-429; Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu, “1966 nyŏndo chuwŏl han'gukkun chakchŏn'gaeyo mit 1967,” HB02338.

<sup>147</sup> “Chakchŏnp'yŏnggabogo [The Operation Assessment Report],” in *Chuwŏlsa kyoribalchŏn charyo*, HB01684.

<sup>148</sup> The 3rd Battalion commander of the Tiger Cavalry Regiment, Lt. Col. Park Jung-hwan, 15 July 1980, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 531.

<sup>149</sup> Park Kyung-suk interview, 18 September 1978, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 446-447.

Company's operation was the only operation that destroyed the enemy by actually encountering them, and other results were from searching tunnels and caves.<sup>150</sup>

Operation Tiger 6 was regarded as the most successful ROK forces' large-scale operation at that time, and the ROKFV was glad that "our casualties were surprisingly small."<sup>151</sup> Since firepower was not helpful in the battle situation, and ROKs had to have a hand to hand fight, this result was a fresh surprise. According to General Yoo's memoir, he admitted that this operation did not achieve its original objective of destroying the estimated enemy main forces because of the enemy's avoidance, and only achieved the pacification in the Mt. Phucacat area. In fact, foremost of the operation's duration, ROK forces were dispersed and stayed to conduct small-scale operations to search for hidden enemies.<sup>152</sup> This tendency was not only confined to Operation Tiger 6. The official ROKFV document's evaluation of their operations of Operation Tiger 7 and Tiger 8, which were conducted from January 1967 after this operation, stated: "We should have conducted an enveloping operation considering the assigned area, but since we operated partially and by stage, it became operations only to chase enemies."<sup>153</sup> As a result, "we were not able to destroy the enemy forces by encircling them."<sup>154</sup>

The tendency that the Viet Cong avoided fighting with the Koreans, as was seen in ROK's 1966 campaign, had some implications on the ROK's conduct in Vietnam. As many ROK officers' testimonies suggested, the North Vietnamese and VC documents said not to engage with the Koreans unless having at least three times more numbers than them.<sup>155</sup> For

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<sup>150</sup> Jeon Seong-gak interview, Ibid., 426.

<sup>151</sup> Sudosadan, "Chönt'usangbo che 49 ho: Maengho 6 ho," HB00104; Yoo, *Yoo Byung-hyun chasöjön*, 112.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>153</sup> "Chakchönp'yönggabogo [The Operation Assessment Report]," in *Chuwölsa kyoribalchön charyo*, HB01684.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Jeon Seong-gak interview, Ibid., 422. 428.

Operation Tiger 6, ROKFV estimated if the enemy had resisted organically and tenaciously, ROK forces would have suffered huge damage. Fortunately, “the enemy got an order not to engage with the Koreans and escape to the tunnel or underground because they had already lost the will to fight after being overwhelmed by the Korean forces in the Operation Tiger 5 and the Battle of Duc Co.”<sup>156</sup> The Tiger Cavalry Regimental commander, Col. Sin Hyun-su argued that the psychological effect became the main element of enemy forces’ avoiding the Korean forces, saying “outright mention such as ‘do it if you want to attack us’ rather resulted in scaring the enemy.”<sup>157</sup>

Enemy forces’ avoidance of engaging the Koreans gives more implications that this must be one of the reasons for the ROK forces’ success in their pacification of the assigned area. First of all, ROKs were not so attractive a target for North Vietnamese and VC to fight. Fundamentally, at the strategic level, the Koreans were relatively marginal targets than the South Vietnamese and Americans. Since having a consistent goal of unifying Vietnam and collapsing the South Vietnamese government as a war policy, the Korean presence was not that vital: If Americans leave, the Koreans would follow. South Korean forces’ different conduct strengthened this tendency. For the enemy forces, it would be tactically easy to achieve a result by attacking South Vietnamese or Americans rather than the Koreans who were usually defensive and cautious by building a strong base even in their offensive operations, such as the North Vietnamese regular forces’ receiving a huge damage when attacking the ROK base in the Battle of Duc Co. Moreover, the Koreans’ fierce, brutal, and tenacious images in addition to their intended promotion for the psychological effect of their conduct, caused the enemy forces to

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<sup>156</sup> Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu, “1966 nyŏndo chuwŏl han'gukkun chakchŏn'gaeyo mit 1967,” HB02338.

<sup>157</sup> Sin Hyun-su interview, 29 September 1966, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet 'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 179-180.

perceive that the Koreans were the unattractive target, considering the outcome versus the casualties.

In mid and late 1966, there were no significant ROK's combat operations except Operation Tiger 6. The Koreans' operation indeed was at a standstill in this period because of the ROK forces' intention for maintaining passivity and the enemy forces' avoidance. Seoul's order to pay attention not to have high casualties before the Presidential election at the beginning of 1967, was an underlying political consideration of the ROKFV.<sup>158</sup> After late September, the White Horse Division started to arrive in South Vietnam and took over an area of 270 kilometers length and 5 kilometers width along Highway 1 from Tuyhoa to Panrang. The newly arrived division got missions from General Chae to secure Highway 1 and military facilities, protect the population and destroy VC, stabilize TAOR, conduct civil-affairs operations, and build 27 places of company bases. But they mainly had an adjustment period for the new battlefield during this time.<sup>159</sup> The Capital (Tiger) Division generally observed the situation without acting. In fact, the U.S. operational report recognized that Operation Tiger 6 was the only ROK's large-scale operation of the middle and late 1966, with the U.S. helicopters support only for ten days (13-22 October).<sup>160</sup> At the end of 1966, despite becoming a corps size, ROKFV focused on pacification operations including building bases, small-scale operations, and civil-affairs operations instead of launching a large-scale combat operation that could cause high casualties.

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<sup>158</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 116

<sup>159</sup> Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], vol. 2 (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso, 2002), 11-14.

<sup>160</sup> I Field Force Vietnam, "Operational Report for Quarterly Period Ending 31 January 1967," 11 March 1967, AD390962, DTIC.

U.S. forces criticized the Korean forces as being a “political army.” According to Col. Son Jang-rae, one U.S. officer told him, “there are only civilians in your area. Use the least number for protecting the facilities, and you should destroy the enemy forces with the rest of the troops to end the war quickly.”<sup>161</sup> He then countered, “our achievement is better than the Americans.”<sup>162</sup> In this situation, the large-scale “search and destroy” operation, Operation Tiger 6, in addition to the success in the Battle of Duc Co functioned as a justification of ROK forces’ inactivity in this period. Due to ROK troops undertaking responsibility in the Mt. Phu Cat area without U.S. ground troops, in addition to achieving significant results, the U.S. forces were able to operate in another area.

Despite their criticism of ROK forces, after the ROK’s conduct in 1966, the U.S. forces could not help admitting ROK forces as a different entity. ROK troops had a different political consideration to gain maximum outcome with minimum casualties, and therefore they passively launched the combat operations. However, their success in the early phase of the participation, as a result of their efficiency of pacification as well as combat operations proved by its high killing ratio gave the impression that ROK troops were reliable allied forces.<sup>163</sup> Besides, the U.S. forces’ political condition forced them to accept the Koreans. Despite their dissatisfaction with ROK forces’ conduct in the war, the U.S. forces had to accept the ROK’s difference mainly because they needed more ROK troops for the conduct of the war. At least, the Koreans’ presence was regarded to be important for allies’ conduct in the Vietnam War. Then they had the new year of 1967.

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<sup>161</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 114.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu, *Chuwŏlgun sogae*, ch.2, 6.

## Chapter 4

### Different Style of Search and Destroy Operation: The ROKFV's Large-Scale Operations in 1967

#### “What Should be the ROK's Priority?": Background of Launching ROK's Biggest Operation

1967 would be a decisive year for the allied forces' conduct in the Vietnam War. The U.S. forces commander, General Westmoreland thought, “the momentum gained by the end of 1966 carried over into 1967.”<sup>1</sup> At the end of 1966, the U.S. strength increased into about 486,000 with sufficient firepower and mobile equipment, and ROK forces peaked to about 50,000, owing to the arrival of an additional combat division. Meanwhile, the enemy forces had been badly hurt and became defensive and passive.<sup>2</sup> This kind of situation gave allied troops a chance to enter the new phase of the war. Despite the allied forces' conduct of a war of attrition, General Westmoreland expected to have a decisive victory for the Vietnam War by conducting more offensive operations. At the same time, he wanted that the allied forces should also use defensive measures to enhance local security for achieving the military goal of pacifying South Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in addition to the consideration of the balance between the two missions of offensive combat operation and pacification operation, based on seeking the efficiency of warfighting, the allied forces set each troops' primary mission.

The Combined Campaign Plan for 1967 established the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces' primary mission:

RVNAF, U.S. and FWMA forces will be employed to accomplish the mission in accordance with the objectives established and tasks assigned for this campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> Ulysses S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), 131.

<sup>2</sup> “Summary of USMACV News Events, 1966,” 14 January 1967, Folder 1, Box 0, Bud Harton Collection, VNCA.

<sup>3</sup> Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968*, 132-133.

RVNAF will have the primary mission of supporting Revolutionary Development activities, with priority in and around the National Priority Areas and other areas of critical significance, defending governmental centers, and protecting and controlling national resources, particularly rice and salt. ... The primary mission of U.S. and FWMAF will be to destroy the VC/NVA main forces, base areas, and resources and/or drive the enemy into the sparsely populated and food-scarce areas; secure their base areas and clear in the vicinity of these bases; and as directed assist in the protection and control of national resources.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the U.S. forces' priority was to destroy the enemy forces by offensive combat operation, while the South Vietnamese would secure and stabilize the area by pacification operation. The efficiency of warfighting was the main concern with this decision. The U.S. forces who had high mobility and tremendous firepower fit into the offensive operation, while South Vietnamese who did not have the same level of mobility and firepower as the U.S. were better suited for the control of the population. Fundamentally, South Vietnamese forces understood "the language, customs, problems, and aspirations of the Vietnamese people—for they were part of this people."<sup>5</sup> In fact, even though such an idea was not formally adopted until this plan, after the U.S. ground combat forces gradual arrival, there was a division of efforts that American troops focused much of the fight against enemy main force units while nearly half the South Vietnamese Army assumed responsibility for local security.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the 1967 Combined Campaign Plan was an "official" confirmation for the allied forces' conduct in Vietnam.

If so, between the two missions, what should be ROK forces' priority? Even though the ROKA's warfighting style was based on U.S. Army doctrine and tactics, to fight exactly like

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<sup>4</sup> "Military Assistance Command Vietnam, and Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, Combined Campaign Plan 1967," Folder 14, Box 5, Larry Berman Collection, VNCA.

<sup>5</sup> Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968*, 132.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1999), 16-17.

Americans was difficult for the Koreans because of their lacking the same level of mobility and firepower the same as the U.S. troops in Vietnam. Besides this practical reason, more fundamentally, ROKFV wanted to operate differently from the U.S. forces based on their own political and strategic considerations on the Vietnam War; and thus, had focused on stabilizing and securing assigned areas rather than conducting search and destroy operations. On the other hand, the Koreans as foreign forces had a natural limitation in conducting pacification compared to South Vietnamese forces. Nevertheless, ROK forces had effectively conducted the pacification mission—as even the U.S. forces had evaluated, indeed it was more like criticism from their request to the Koreans to be aggressive, that the South Koreans were more suitable for pacification such as the rural development support.

The 1967 Combined Campaign Plan designated that South Koreans' primary mission should be large-scale offensive, so-called "search and destroy" operation: "U.S. combat forces [as well as Koreans] would carry the bulk of the offensive effort against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army main force units."<sup>7</sup> When officially drawing a mission demarcation between the South Vietnamese and other foreign forces, the U.S. forces wanted South Koreans to have the same mission as Americans, which they had demanded of South Koreans from the beginning. The U.S. forces needed more combat troops to take charge of the offensive mission of 1967, while the South Vietnamese, a bulk of the allied troops, would focus primarily on pacification. As a result, the U.S. forces wanted South Koreans to get out of their TAOR and sweep the VC areas.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> George L. MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1998), 192.

Despite their complex situation, the ROK forces accepted the U.S. forces' demand.

ROKFV's campaign plan described the combined campaign plan as the basic guide for their conduct for 1967:

Following the arrival of the White Horse Division in late 1966 and the offensive combined campaign plan, since 1967, ROK forces became more offensive compared to the past by increasing the number and intensity of the large-scale combat operation. In 1967, two divisions simultaneously launched the large-scale operation to pacify the Go Boi flat area.<sup>9</sup>

Before its approval and distribution on 10 January 1967, the combined campaign plan had been three times as a result of the meeting with the U.S., Korean, and South Vietnamese military officials after November 1966.<sup>10</sup> In these working-level meetings, South Koreans did not particularly or outwardly oppose the main idea and accepted the basic policy.

Here are some more reasons for ROK's acceptance. First, they did not have a good pretext to refuse the U.S. forces' demand for launching a large-scale offensive in 1967. ROK had been criticized by the U.S. for its passiveness and inactivity and had a tacit pressure for the offensive, and since the 9th Division's adjustment for the new battlefield was wrapped up in late 1966, ROK forces could not stay passive anymore. Moreover, by accepting the U.S.'s request to launch large-scale operations, ROK forces also intended to prevent U.S. forces' advanced requests—such as dispatching troops to the dangerous area of borderline to fight against the North Vietnamese regular.<sup>11</sup> Fundamentally, despite exercising independent OPCON for their forces, having a close relationship with the U.S. forces was essential for the Korean forces'

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<sup>9</sup> Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], "1966 nyŏndo chuwŏl han'gukkun chakchŏn'gaeyo mit 1967 nyŏndo chŏnyŏkkyehoek pogosŏ [The Summary of 1966 ROKFV Operations and the Report of 1967 Campaign Plan]," HB02338.

<sup>10</sup> "Operational Report for Quarterly Period Ending 31 January 1967," 11 March 1967, AD390962, DTIC.

<sup>11</sup> "1966 nyŏndo chuwŏl han'gukkun chakchŏn'gaeyo mit 1967 nyŏndo chŏnyŏkkyehoek pogosŏ," HB02338.

staying in Vietnam. They relied on the U.S. forces for almost everything—such as support, logistics, and even individual soldiers’ payment—to conduct in the Vietnam War.

Second, it was a matter of pride. They wanted to promote themselves to the outside world that they fought well and their conduct in Vietnam was effective. The corps size of ROK forces technically became a considerable key actor of the allied forces, and they had to play a significant role especially in II CTZ. The new situation of 1967 required the Koreans to show off their combat capability, that they were not only good in pacification but also in large-scale offensive operations. ROK forces also needed to launch offensive operations from their military perspective. Since the Koreans had completed pacifying their tactical area of responsibility, ROK forces were supposed to get out its TAOR and expand the pacified area following its phased operational plan. 1967 was the proper time for them to move on to phase III which required them to be more offensive. Fortunately for ROK forces, Seoul’s political pressure to keep the casualties down was to some degree eased before and after President Park’s win in the Presidential election of 3 May 1967.

Last, by accepting the U.S. forces’ strategy, ROK forces were able to attain not only cause but also interest. They actively sought benefits while accepting U.S. demands. Additionally, by launching large-scale operations, ROKs wanted to appeal that their troops need to be modernized such as to upgrade their personal-weapon from M1 to M16. According to Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (G-3) of ROKFV, Col. Han Min-seok, “once having a signature event with the U.S., South Vietnamese, and South Korean commanders, we have to set out offensive operations with the U.S., at least outwardly, even though internally focusing more on pacification operations.”<sup>12</sup> This was why, the ROKFV commander, Lt. Gen. Chae, demanded

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<sup>12</sup> Han Min-sök interview, August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 122.

only his official signature on this combined plan without opposing it, based on his intention to give a symbolic meaning that South Korea was one of the main decision-makers in the conduct of the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup> Internally, he thought the combined campaign policy was more symbolic, political, and official rather than actual authority to regulate the ROKFV's conduct in Vietnam. ROKs had a scheme that they could make the best use of their troops to achieve maximum results with minimum costs, even in their official mission of conducting large-scale operations.

South Korean forces' largest offensive combat operation, Operation Oh Jac Kyo from 8 March to 31 May, was designed based on this intention to achieve both a cause and interest. General Chae said, "We need to let other countries know that the Korean troops were contributing significantly in pacifying South Vietnam."<sup>14</sup> Not just following the combined campaign plan, but Koreans wanted to show off their combat power by achieving a good result in this operational area, where the U.S. forces had failed to pacify despite their ten month-long operations.<sup>15</sup> Although this Phu Yen and the Go Boi flat area was one of the most strategically important areas in East Central Vietnam, it was still a government authority vacuum dominated by VC. Thus, the Korean forces could gain enough cause for this operation by launching an operation in the area outside of their TAOR despite the U.S. forces' doubt about the ROK's success, that the two divisions would not be enough for this operation.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, ROKFV's own interest was its driving force for this operation. In addition to the scheme to gain an external cause, General Chae suggested, "I launched [this

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 1 August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 67; Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, Ibid., 91.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

operation] based on the idea to achieve the national interest and obtain foreign money.”<sup>17</sup> From the military perspective, ROKFV needed a link-up of its two divisions. Col. Han Min-seok explained, “the Tiger’s TAOR was like a circle and the White Horse’s one was stretched out, and they were separated one from another. Therefore, to cooperate was difficult, and for the White Horse, its flank was exposed to the enemy since its occupying a long depth of the area.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in the strategic perspective, seizing and pacifying this area would be important for Koreans to gain economic profits from the war, as they regarded this area as the “best land” in South Vietnam: not only a food basket but also the area with key facilities of military and transportation.<sup>19</sup> General Chae explained that he, indeed, planned this operation since the 9th (White Horse) Division arrived in Vietnam: “if we occupied this area, it would be helpful for pacifying South Vietnam and for our private enterprises to enter South Vietnam by using well-equipped infrastructures such as ports, railroad, and roads in this area.”<sup>20</sup> This explanation showed that he sought not only a cause for allies’ pacification effort but also ROK’s interest from the beginning. ROKFV knew that “the success [in this area] would [also] bring a propaganda effect,” in addition to gaining cause and interest.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, ROKFV had more political motivation in launching Operation Oh Jac Kyo.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Han Min-sök interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 125.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, Ibid., 91.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

### “Not Perfect in terms of a Search and Destroy:” ROKFV’s Large-scale Operations in 1967

Operation Oh Jac Kyo has been regarded as one of the “greatest successful” operations in ROK forces’ history of the Vietnam War. General Chae argued that Operation Oh Jac Kyo became a new milestone of the Vietnam War because this made the impossible possible. He claimed that by linking the two different regions and pacifying them, ROKs broke the common idea of securing dots and lines as the best possible method in the Vietnam War. Not only from South Korean including its government and media, but also from outside of Korea, ROKFV got praise for its’ success.<sup>22</sup> As a result of Operation Oh Jac Kyo, the ROK forces were able to expand its TAOR from 4,470 square kilometers to 6,800 square kilometers. The linkup operation was so successful that the two separated divisions got together. Also, the South Koreans were able to open a 400 kilometers long section of Highway 1. Moreover, ROK forces decreased 15 days in achieving its goal from its original plan and reduced casualties to only one-third of their original estimation.<sup>23</sup>

Militarily, the Koreans set three goals in this operation. The biggest operational goal was to link up the two separated Tiger and White Horse divisions, as the name of the operation symbolized.<sup>24</sup> Another goal was to pacify the Go Boi flat area which was situated between the two divisions, and the other additional goal was to open Highway 1, which went along the eastern coast.<sup>25</sup> ROKFV divided the operation into two phases as a plan. The first phase,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 91-92.

<sup>23</sup> Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol. 2 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1981), 514; *Chuwölgun chönt’ujewön* [The Combat Data of ROKFV] (Saigon: Chuwölsa, 1969), 1

<sup>24</sup> The operation’s name Oh Jac Kyo was originated from the Korean traditional folk tale that two lovers of Kyonwoo and Jik-nyo met once a year across the Oh Jac Kyo bridge which was built by magpies.

<sup>25</sup> Sudosadan [The Capital Division], “Chönt’usangbo che 58 ho: Ojakkyo – 1 ho [Combat After Action Report No. 58: Operation Oh Jac Kyo I],” 1967, HB00105; 9 sadan [The 9th Division], “Chönt’usangbo che 35 ho: Ojakkyo chakchön [Combat After Action Report No. 35: Operation Oh Jac Kyo],” 1967, HB00010.

Operation Oh Jac Kyo I, was to expand the TAOR and link-up the two divisions. By mobilizing five infantry battalions (three from the Tiger and two from the White Horse), ROK forces would conduct a search and destroy operation in order to destroy VC. After the end of the linking-up operation, the second phase, which was called Operation Oh Jac Kyo II, would be started to secure and stabilize this new area.<sup>26</sup> They planned to conduct pacification operations in this phase: “the main operation was to secure this region by building company bases, ambushing to destroy the remaining enemy forces, conducting civil-affairs operations, and supporting South Vietnamese government’s pacification.”<sup>27</sup> Given its operational plan, Operation Oh Jac Kyo would be a combination of two stages, search and destroy and pacification operation, to expand and pacify the region.

Without a doubt, ROKFV achieved its goal by linking up the two divisions: at 10:30 of 18 April, the two divisions made a “dramatic” link up.<sup>28</sup> The end of the linking up operation meant the end of the first phase, Operation Oh Jac Kyo I. However, whether intended or not, ROK’s operation in the first phase was not that successful in terms of destroying the bulk of the enemy forces. First, like the Tiger Division’s former search and destroy operations, ROK forces were not able to find and fix the bulk of the enemy forces. The VC had already run away from the area or often deliberately avoided the ROK’s offensive. Second, despite their search and destroy mission, the actual process in the first phase came to be more oriented on troop advancement for the link-up. Because of the symbolic significance of the linking up of the two divisions, many officers testified that each troop competed for the completion of the link-up

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<sup>26</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 2, 397.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 502-505. Yoo Byung-hyun, *Yoo Byung-hyun chasöjön* [Yoo Byung-hyun Autobiography] (Seoul: Chogapchedatk’öm, 2013), 127.

mission. The 1st Battalion commander, Lt. Col. Lee Young-woo estimated, “Anyway, the Operation Oh Jac Kyo was a strange political show.”<sup>29</sup>

The VC was not destroyed. During the second phase of Operation Oh Jac Kyo, from 19 April to 31 May, the VC ravaged ROK company bases twice as if they prove that they were undiminished. After the first phase of the operation, the ROKs started to perform pacification operations to stabilize and secure their newly obtained area during the second phase. The White Horse put one battalion to pacify 160 square kilometers (among the obtained 320 square kilometers territory, half would be in charge of the South Vietnamese), and the Tiger put two battalions for 230 square kilometers, based on the estimation that among 3,230 square kilometers of the division’s TAOR, 2,900 square kilometers was safety area, 100 square kilometers was near to safety area, and 230 square kilometers was on the pacifying process.<sup>30</sup> Each infantry company scattered into a vast area and kept conducting small-scale operations by employing company bases. Considering the ROK battalion had four companies, each company had to pacify an approximately 40 square kilometers area.

With the burden of taking responsibility for the vast area, in addition to the guards’ negligence by being puffed up by the previous triumph in the link-up operation, relaxed Korean soldiers received serious damage from these VC attacks. Also, ROK forces were involved with several issues in the control of people. For example, more than multiple numbers of Korean officer testified that there were dying of starvation and rape incidents during ROK’s evacuation of refugees.<sup>31</sup> Fundamentally, even though ROK forces evaluated that they completed the

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<sup>29</sup> Lee Young-woo interview, 13 August 1980, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 2, 148.

<sup>30</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awŏl han’gukkun chŏnsa*, vol. 2, 515.

<sup>31</sup> Kim Chi-ho interview, 18 August 1980, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 141; The 2nd Battalion commander of the Tiger 1st Regiment, Lt. Col. Park Chŏng-won interview, 19 July 1980, *Ibid.*, 534-535; S-3 (operations) officer of the 10th Artillery Battalion, Capt. Kwon Yong-chŏl, 12-13 August 1980, *Ibid.*, 548.

pacification successfully, this operation questioned the evaluation process and success criteria of pacification. Col. Kim Chi-ho, Combat Development Department of ROKFV, testified, the tendency that “to stress what we did well and to hide what we failed,” was noticeable in Operation Oh Jac Kyo because of pursuing the political result through this operation.<sup>32</sup> Even after the end of Operation Oh Jak Kyo, ROKFV had to continue pacification operations in this area. As a result, this operation did not mean the end state of the pacification in the newly occupied area, rather it was merely starting to pacify the area, which might have to be an endless process in the war.

Figure 9. Operation Oh Jac Kyo, 15 March 1967.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 10. Operation Oh Jac Kyo, 15 March 1967.



Figures 9 and 10 are reprinted with permission from the Collection of Government Record Photographs e-Motion Picture History Museum.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Kim Chi-ho interview, *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>33</sup> Korean soldier arming with the M-1 rifle sticks out.

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/common/search\\_result.jsp](http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/common/search_result.jsp)

Another ROKFV's large-scale search and destroy operations in 1967, Operation Hong Kil-dong, was indeed an extension of Operation Oh Jac Kyo. On 9 July, ROKFV initiated the search and destroy operation in the newly expanded area gained by Operation Oh Jac Kyo, based on their estimation that they focused too much on the link-up that did not achieve success in destroying Viet Cong in the previous operation. General Chae explained, "We could not help launching Operation Hong Kil-dong because we missed a bulk of the enemy in spite of our surprise attack to them in Operation Oh Jac Kyo."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the U.S. forces provided the information that the main forces of the North Vietnamese Army Fifth Division had been reinforced in this area. Chae said, "since the new enemy forces were going to be reinforced to the remaining one, we need to block their reinforcement by destroying them."<sup>36</sup>

ROK's operational concept of Operation Hong Kil-dong was based on the U.S. search and destroy operation: to sweep the area and destroy the enemy forces by using mobility and firepower. General Chae explained, "Operation Hong Kil-dong was jungle warfare. So far, we had conducted operations in a village area; but in this operation, we conducted a mobile operation using a huge number of helicopters because of the terrain. We named the operation as "Hong Kil-dong," for pursuing the speed and surprise impact."<sup>37</sup> To destroy the enemy by the speed and surprise was especially emphasized in this operation, as General Chae said, "to strike the enemy in their mid-assembly which was their weakest timing before their preparing for the attack."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, ROK forces had to depend on U.S. mobile capability. The two assault helicopter companies in the U.S. 10th Combat Aviation Battalion supported ROK's "conduct of

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<sup>35</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, Ibid., 92.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Hong Kil-dong was the legendary hero of Korea as Robin Hood who suddenly appeared and vanished into thin air by riding the cloud and using the magical method of contracting distances.

<sup>38</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 1 August 1969, Ibid., 67

extensive search and destroy operations.”<sup>39</sup> Only for the D-day, “thirty UH1D’s and nine CH47’s were employed.”<sup>40</sup> During this operation, U.S. helicopters had about 11,000 sorties and lifted a total of about 20,000 transports of soldiers.<sup>41</sup>

The Koreans also pursued to concentrating sufficient forces. As a result, a total of two five battalions from the Tiger Division and six battalions from the White Horse Division participated in the operation.<sup>42</sup> Not only based on the speed but also “General Chae’s concept of the operation was to mass our far superior firepower against the enemy.”<sup>43</sup> In light of ROK’s previous operations, this operation was significantly aggressive and bold, as its attempt was “to destroy the heart of the enemy forces at once by striking first.”<sup>44</sup> To fix and destroy the enemy forces, ROKFV made “a complete encirclement of the enemy along a 50 kilometer perimeter” on the first day, and “tighten up the encirclement averaging a one to two kilometer advance per day.”<sup>45</sup>

ROKFV estimated tough fights against the main forces of the North Vietnamese Regular for this operation. However, during 48 days of the operational period (9 July-26 August), there was almost no contact with the enemy main forces.<sup>46</sup> ROK forces enveloped the estimated area of the NVA Fifth Division’s headquarter, but the search and destroy operation was fruitless. One

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<sup>39</sup> 10th Combat Aviation Battalion, “After Action Report - Operation HONG KIL DONG,” 12 September 1967, Folder 17, Box 4, Richard Detra Collection, VNCA.

<sup>40</sup> “MACV Commanders’ Conference 24 September 1967,” 12 October 1967. Box 23, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>41</sup> “After Action Report - Operation HONG KIL DONG,” VNCA.

<sup>42</sup> Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P’awŏl han’gukkun chŏnsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol. 3 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1971), 120; *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>43</sup> “MACV Commanders’ Conference 24 September 1967,” NARA II.

<sup>44</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awŏl han’gukkun chŏnsa*, vol. 2, 125.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*; “MACV Commanders’ Conference 24 September 1967,” NARA II.

<sup>46</sup> Sudosadan [The Capital Division], “Chŏnt’usangbo che 69 ho: Hongkildong [Combat After Action Report No. 69: Operation Hong Kil-dong],” 1967, HB00106

soldier wrote, “we did not have an engagement two weeks after the operation.”<sup>47</sup> Lt. Jeong Tae-choon, the 3rd Platoon Leader of the 6th Company in the Tiger Cavalry Regiment, wrote, “we did not have a good fight 15 days after Operation Hong Kil-dong.”<sup>48</sup> Instead of engaging with the bulk of the enemy forces, the ROK forces’ operation was dominated by small-scale engagements. In the MACV conference, ROKFV explained the reason, “the enemy overestimated the strength of our maneuver forces and instead of putting up a systematic defense they fragmented and tried to escape. Those who could not, hid in their caves.”<sup>49</sup> After acquiring the information that the NVA had already withdrawn from the operational area from the investigation of captured NVA officer, ROK forces ended the operation.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the failure of search and destroy the main enemy forces, this operation made a certain achievement. ROKFV evaluated that they caused the enemy forces huge damage during this operation, due to their small-scale operations: “The success of the operation was due in great part to the aggressiveness of individual soldiers and night ambush techniques which we employed.”<sup>51</sup> The Tiger Division’s after-action report wrote that by small-scale contacts they caused 15-20 percent troop and 19 percent weapon damage to the two NVA battalions of the 95th Regiment. The Koreans killed 394 and captured 34 enemy forces.<sup>52</sup> The U.S. forces evaluation in terms of ROK’s number of military gains were higher than ROK forces’ evaluation. The U.S. MACV’s Monthly Assessment in September 1967 reported, “Operation Hong Kil dong, the third phase of which terminated on 26 August, has netted 637 enemy killed

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<sup>47</sup> “P’obyōnggwanch’ŭkchanggyo Ch’oegwanghŭi [FSO Choi Gwang-hee Memoir],” in *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> “Kigabyōndae 6 chungdae 3 sodae chungwi chōngt’aech’un [The 3rd Platoon leader of the 6th Company, Tiger Cavalry Regiment, Lt. Jung Tae-chun Memoir],” in *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> “MACV Commanders’ Conference 24 September 1967,” NARA II.

<sup>50</sup> Sudosadan, “Chōnt’usangbo che 69 ho: Hongkildong,” HB00106.

<sup>51</sup> “MACV Commanders’ Conference 24 September 1967,” NARA II.

<sup>52</sup> Sudosadan, “Chōnt’usangbo che 69 ho: Hongkildong,” HB00106.

and 88 PW's at a cost to friendly forces of 27 killed and 68 wounded. These operations have reduced a major threat posed by main force enemy units."<sup>53</sup> However, the U.S. forces assessed that the Koreans were not able to completely pacify the region with this operation, saying "local force and terrorist groups remain active on the coastal plains."<sup>54</sup> As a result, the ROKFV's large-scale search and destroy operation was half successful in terms of the complete destruction of enemy forces.

Even though ROK forces' series of large-scale operations in 1967 did not make enough success in terms of destroying the bulk of the enemy forces, ROK forces' conduct impressed the allied troops. Right after Operation Hong Kil-dong, the U.S. forces evaluated, "The 9th ROK and Capital ROK Divisions in Phu Yen Province enjoyed notable success in terms of large personnel and equipment losses inflicted primarily on the NVA 95th Regiment, and on thwarting accomplishment of enemy objectives in Phu Yen Province."<sup>55</sup> The kill ratio—1:30 at Operation Oh Jac Kyo and 1:23 at Operation Hong Kil-dong—and large numbers of captured enemy weapons in these operations proved the effectiveness of the ROK forces' operation.<sup>56</sup> Not only promoting these results but ROKFV also proudly said that the result of ratio 1:1.3 of captured weapon and killed enemy meant, "we wanted to minimize the enemy casualties as well as achieving the maximum results of minimum casualties."<sup>57</sup> ROKFV had appealed this kind of the effectiveness of their warfighting in the large-scale offensive operations after 1966, and their

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<sup>53</sup> Memos from COMUSMACV to President Lyndon B. Johnson, "Monthly Assessment," 6 September 1967, Folder 2, Box 2, Veteran Members of the 109th Quartermaster Company Collection, VNCA.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> For example, at Operation Oh Jac Kyo, in the first phase only, ROK forces killed 223 and took 212 prisoners in addition to capturing 174 rifles, while ROKs had only 42 casualties (seven KIA). Sudosadan, "Chõnt'usangbo che 58 ho: Ojakkyo – 1 ho," HB00105; Sudosadan, "Chõnt'usangbo che 69 ho: Hongkildong," HB00106.

<sup>57</sup> Sudosadan, "Chõnt'usangbo che 58 ho: Ojakkyo – 1 ho," HB00105

operations in 1967 strengthened their assertion. Based on these results, ROKFV was able to promote both inside and outside that the Koreans performed excellently in Vietnam.

Foremost, based on its plan, process, and result—Operation Oh Jac Kyo was not the typical search and destroy operation, which should have focused on sweeping the enemy with firepower and mobility after finding and fixing them. While the U.S. search and destroy aimed not at territory but the destruction of the enemy forces, this ROK's large-scale combat operation attempted to achieve both objectives. The U.S. observers' document on the ROK's operation gives a hint to understand the characteristics of the ROK forces' large-scale operations: The ROK's search and destroy operation was different from that of the U.S. forces. ROK's operation in the first phase of Operation Oh Jac Kyo indicated that it was externally a search and destroy operation following the combined campaign plan; but internally, Koreans transfigured into a slightly different style, which focused more on expanding and pacifying the area through small-scale operations.

Based on the category of the allied forces' major combat operations, Operation Oh Jac Kyo was not a "search and destroy" but a "search and clear" operation, which had "a permanent intention to remain in the area and pacify the area."<sup>58</sup> Even though Operation Hong Kil-dong fitted into the "search and destroy" operation, which was "to seek, find, and destroy enemy forces," like Operation Oh Jac Kyo, most of the ROK's large-scale combat operations were clearing operations.<sup>59</sup> In 1967, General Westmoreland observed:

The two Korean infantry divisions—The Capital and the 9th—conducted highly successful clearing operations in the central coastal plains. One of their largest, more important operations was Oh Jac Kyo I in March and April, in which the two

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<sup>58</sup> Headquarters 1st Cavalry Division, "Quarterly Command Report for Second Fiscal Quarter, FY 66," Box 23, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

divisions linked their areas of responsibility and secured a considerable portion of Route 1 along the coast. The Korean forces gradually assumed responsibility for most of the II Corps coastal area, releasing U.S. units there for other tasks.<sup>60</sup>

Westmoreland regarded Operation Oh Jac Kyo as a clearing operation. What was a clearing operation? There were three basic types of military operations conducted in the Vietnam War: “search and destroy,” “clearing,” and “securing” operations. Among these three, search and destroy operation was more oriented to conventional combat operation using mobility and firepower, and the clearing and securing operation was for the pacification effort.<sup>61</sup> The U.S. forces defined, “clearing operations are offensive combat operations conducted in a well defined zone and directed at destroying or permanently driving VC military forces out of a clearly designated area.”<sup>62</sup> Like search and destroy operation, clearing operation was an offensive combat operation to “to rid an area of organized VC/NVA main forces and eliminate permanently the threat of overt VC interference.”<sup>63</sup> However, it was also “entirely different from search and destroy operations, although similar military tactics may be employed.”<sup>64</sup> As a part of pacification efforts, a clearing operation was the initial phase of the pacification that was followed by other phases of Revolutionary Development (RD) phases, overall securing operation. Also, while search and destroy operations chased the enemy from an area or destroyed him, clearing operations kept the enemy off balance and allowed the South Vietnamese government to extend its influence into the area.<sup>65</sup> Based on the combined campaign plan, the

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<sup>60</sup> Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968*, 142.

<sup>61</sup> Major Robert A. Doughty, *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1979), 31-32.

<sup>62</sup> Headquarters US MACV, “Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam,” 17 September 1965, Folder 3, Box 3, Larry Berman Collection, VNCA.

<sup>63</sup> “Military Participation in Revolutionary Development,” November 1966, Folder 9, Box 4, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Doughty, *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine*, 32.

U.S. and other allied troops were to conduct search and destroy, while the South Vietnamese were to do pacification efforts—ARVN for clearing operation and regional troops such as PF and RF for securing operation.

However, the ideal models for types of operations often resembled actional operations only in their purpose rather than in their specific techniques. For ROKFV, even when initiated operations as a purpose of search and destroy operations, they often transited into clearing operations. Internally, this fit into ROK's own strategy and compensated for their lack of capability and fundamental limitation of search and destroy operation—difficulties of finding the bulk of the enemy forces due to the enemy avoidance. Since both search and destroy and clearing operations are offensive operations to destroy the enemy forces, externally, the U.S. forces did not have a pretext to criticize the ROK forces for its inactivity. ROKs' successful clearing operation lessened the load of the U.S. Army for their pacification efforts. Moreover, the South Vietnamese forces' relative inferiority caused the U.S. forces to realize their need for the South Koreans to conduct clearing operations. Not only South Vietnamese regional forces but ARVN, who should be "deployed as the clearing force" based on the 1967 campaign plan, had a problem with conduct, "even with an attainment of the highest feasible mobilization goals, ARVN will have insufficient forces to carry out the kind of successful campaign against the VC which is considered essential for the purposes discussed above."<sup>66</sup>As a result, most of ROK's large-scale offensive operations were able to be conducted based on Korean-style clearing operation.

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<sup>66</sup> Memorandum from W. Robert Warne to Mr. Puritano, "Paper Describing RD/Pacification," 6 June 1967, Reel 2, Johnson National Security Files (microfilm), VNCA.



Figure 11. Operation Hong Kil-dong, 21 August 1967.<sup>67</sup>



Figure 12. Operation Hong Kil-dong, 21 August 1967.

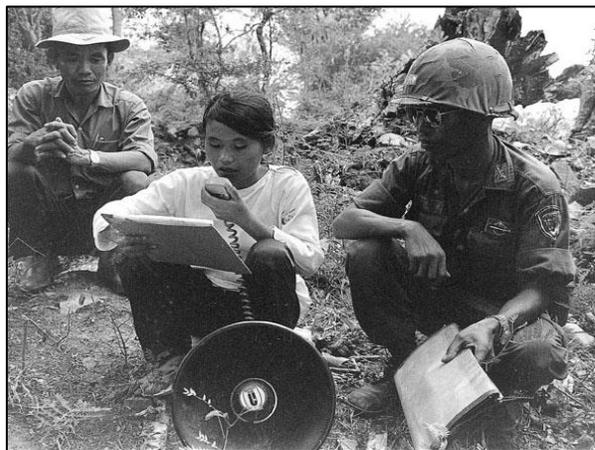


Figure 13. Operation Hong Kil-dong, 21 August 1967.

Figures 11,12, and 13 are reprinted with permission from the Collection of Government Record Photographs e-Motion Picture History Museum.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Korean soldiers arming with the new M-16 rifle sticks out compared to Figure 9 where they are armed with M-1 rifle.

<sup>68</sup> [http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/common/search\\_result.jsp](http://www.ehistory.go.kr/page/common/search_result.jsp)

**“What is the Key for Success?”: The Reality of the ROKFV’s Large-scale Operation.**

The essence of the ROK forces’ combat operation was in the small-unit operation. Lt. Col.

Kim Sun-hyŏn stated about the ROK’s operation:

The aspect of the Vietnam War is represented by Duc Co and Oh Jac Kyo. I had several chances to watch combat operations on the battlefield. Soldiers did reconnaissance moving in column formation. This is an undeniable fact. It is difficult to move in rank formation in Vietnam. As a result, the Vietnam War is based on [small-unit] reconnaissance commanded by platoon leader or company commander. It’s not conventional nor guerilla warfare. It is a meaningless war based on our perspective on how to fight.<sup>69</sup>

It was their excellence in small-scale operations by small-unit, which made results in the large-scale operations, such as Operation Oh Jac Kyo and Operation Hong Kil-dong. The following U.S. observers’ evaluation to find out the key to ROK’s success can be understood in the same context.

The U.S. forces wanted to find out the reasons for the ROK forces’ series of successes. During Operation Oh Jac Kyo, the U.S. I Field Force sent its observer group to the two ROKA divisions. A total of 16 U.S. observer teams (32 personnel)—each team comprised of one officer and one non-commissioned officer—were attached with committed ROK rifle companies in two weeks of 16-30 March 1967.<sup>70</sup> In the letter of instructions for their observers, the U.S. forces explained the reason for observing ROK’s operation as to “identify the tactics and techniques which were being employed by the ROKs to achieve these [successful] result.”<sup>71</sup> As a result, the primary purpose of being with ROK company was to observe the ROK company’s small-scale

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<sup>69</sup> Kim Sun-hyŏn interview, 4 February 1970, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 140.

<sup>70</sup> I Field Force Vietnam, “Tactics and Techniques used by Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam, 3 May 1967, AD390963, DTIC.

<sup>71</sup> I Field Force, Headquarters I Field Force Vietnam to US Observers for Operation Oh Jac Kyo, “Letter of Instructions,” 12 March 1967, AD390963, DTIC.

operation to find out “tactics and techniques employed.”<sup>72</sup> However, observing other troops was not an easy mission. In this case, each team had to report information about ROK’s tactics and techniques in addition to answering to the 19 different provided items based on the observation. Moreover, they would “live, eat, and sleep with the [ROK] company, and fight in defense of the company, if necessary.”<sup>73</sup>

This must also be a striking decision for the U.S. forces, because they, the teacher of the Koreans, wanted to learn from their pupil. Against the ROK’s high kill-ratio and successful conduct in large-scale combat operations in 1966, the U.S. forces must be doubtful and curious and therefore wanted to find reasons for ROK’s key to the success. Also, based on their pessimism on ROK’s Operation Oh Jac Kyo, which would take place in the same area they had failed, they could find good reasons to teach lessons to the Koreans, if ROKs also failed. As a result, the U.S. forces focused on obtaining detailed lessons of the tactical level from the ROK forces to find out either the reasons for the success or failure in ROK’s predictable search and destroy operation.

After the close observation on ROK forces’ operations for two weeks, the U.S. observer team concluded that the U.S. forces should learn from the Koreans. According to the report, the Koreans’ success did not come from the uniqueness of their tactics, but from the excellent application and practice of those tactics. They understood that ROK forces employed the tactics which were “in line with established US Army doctrine,” and “their discipline, their patience, their persistence in attaining an objective” mattered to ROK’s success.<sup>74</sup> More detailed, the document summed up that the “factors which have contributed to the success of ROK forces

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> “Tactics and Techniques used by Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam, DTIC.

includes” were: “the discipline, aggressiveness, training, [and] patience and physical fitness of the ROK soldiers”; “outstanding leadership”; “adherence to tactical doctrine as it taught at US service schools and as it written in US manuals”; “through planning”; “careful initial reconnaissance”; “the time taken to develop the tactical situation”; “the sealing and blocking of selected area prior to entrance”; “thoroughness of the search of selected areas”; “use of the interpreters at company level,” who were trained in ROK division schools.<sup>75</sup>

Americans regarded the Koreans soldier’s excellence as the supreme reason for their success. The Korean translation of U.S. observer team’s report on ROK 9th Division found about the reason for ROK’s high kill ratio:

ROK soldiers searched again and again in the relatively limited area until they found Vietcong, and this was the biggest reason for their success in a search operation. ROKs allocated enough time for the reconnaissance of the area, and the Korean soldiers used the skill to find the object like the hunters do. They are very patient and know Viet Cong well, and we could tell far more enthusiasm from them than the American soldiers. This progressive spirit was not only based on the unit but also from each individual. ... Their leadership, morale, discipline, physical soundness is truly the best. The Koreans not only used the tactics learned from us but also used the ones we forgot a long time ago. Their spirit to fight gave us a huge inspiration.<sup>76</sup>

The U.S. observers highly evaluated the quality of ROK soldiers. First, the ROK company had high cohesion, as the U.S. observed that ROK company acted like one team. The observers evaluated, “there is outstanding rapport between officers, NCO’s and their men. The officers take care of their men; the men take care of their officers.”<sup>77</sup> Company members shared all information about the operation before taking off, and “company commanders and platoon

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> “Migune ūhan ojakkyo chakchŏn ch'amgwan pogo [The U.S. Forces’ Report Observing Operation Oh Jac Kyo],” 31 March 1967, in 9 sadan [The 9th Division], “Chŏnt'usangbo [Combat After Action Report],” 1967, HB00016.

<sup>77</sup> “Tactics and Techniques used by Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam, DTIC.

leaders insured that their troops were fully conversant with each day's operational plan."<sup>78</sup> Thus, Korean soldiers were able to achieve the unity of effort on their goals. Second, the document evaluated the discipline and morale of the average soldier ranged from "excellent to outstanding," arguing, "discipline appeared to be second nature for the ROK soldier; he obeyed orders quickly and cheerfully. He did not complain and appeared to apply his combat training without instructions of urging. In the absence of orders, he reacted automatically as he had been taught."<sup>79</sup> Although blind loyalty might cause more harm to the military, the observers evaluated that ROK's discipline would enhance the efficiency of operation because even in the absence of orders, ROK soldiers could react immediately as he had been trained. Third, they had high morale. The observation document explained: "observers reported that a feeling of solidarity and mutual support existed among all ROK units. ... The eagerness of officers and men alike was evident at all times. The cheerful obedience to orders, desire to do a good job and an aggressive attitude at the individual soldier level were indicative of exceptionally high morale."<sup>80</sup>

In addition to the quality of ROK soldiers, their practice and application of tactics impressed the observers. The observers agreed that the excellency in the conduct of small-scale operations was ROK's key for success even in a large-scale operation. They did not regard the ROK tactics as unique, but based on the U.S. Army doctrine that "squad, company, and battalion operations were characterized by skillful use of fire and maneuver and by strict fire discipline." At the same time, they found ROK's own characteristics: "It should be noted that regardless of the type operation or formation used, the actions were characterized by patience, a thorough estimate of the situation, use of fire and maneuver, and search and counter-search of suspected

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

areas.” The U.S. forces general criticism on the ROK forces such as inactivity and passiveness were replaced with carefulness and thoroughness in this document: “They took their time and moved only when the unit was ready.”

ROK company’s combat operation showed some differences in the practice of tactics from the U.S. Army. In search and destroy operation, “all observers agreed that the tactics and techniques of ROK’s search and reconnaissance was a decisive factor to find the enemy and enemy weapons.”<sup>81</sup> At first, ROK’s areas of operation for platoons and companies were a lot smaller than those assigned U.S. units.<sup>82</sup> They wrote, “the ROK high commanders were thinking that to search thoroughly in a small area was much more effective than searching broadly in a large area.”<sup>83</sup> One battalion searched an average of 3-4 square kilometers area within 24 hours and searched the same area again after a few days.<sup>84</sup> Second, the ROK units did not sweep the area. Instead, a ROK company remained in the same area to search three or four times by different platoons. Even in village cordon and search, the observer was impressed that ROK’s search the same village again a few days later. Also, they found ROK’s different tactics in ambush, “after observing the ROK ambushes, U.S. observers believed that most US ambush forces are too large.”<sup>85</sup> Third, unlike the U.S. who moved their post in the daytime, ROK’s company’s command post moved during the night, which impressed the U.S. observers that the Koreans were bold. Last, according to the U.S. observers attached to ROK Tiger Division’s Operation Tiger 11, ROK forces were especially skillful at the night operation.<sup>86</sup> For Americans,

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<sup>81</sup> “Migune ūihan ojakkyo chakchŏn ch'amgwan pogo,” HB00016.

<sup>82</sup> “Tactics and Techniques used by Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam, DTIC.

<sup>83</sup> “Migune ūihan ojakkyo chakchŏn ch'amgwan pogo,” HB00016.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> The U.S. forces kept observing ROK forces’ search and destroy operations, and their evaluations were not that different from the one in Operation Oh Jac Kyo. See: “ROK Operations, Details and Lessons Learned,” 15 May 1968, Box 12, MACV Historical Working Group Files 1967-1973, RG 472, NARA II.

the Koreans were the troops who were still good at “primitive” tactics which the U.S. troops forgot to use.

Despite the failure of finding the bulk of the enemy forces, ROK forces’ small-scale operations made a result in Operation Oh Jac Kyo and Hong Kil Dong. In Operation Oh Jac Kyo, ROKFV planned a corps-size operation, but the two divisions operated separately in the different regions.<sup>87</sup> The Tiger Division went down to the south from Song Cau, and the White Horse Division went up to the north from Tuy Hoa. The Tiger employed five battalions and White Horse employed three battalions. Inside their operational area, each division set the area with four steps and advanced conducting search and destroy inside the interdiction line area.<sup>88</sup> As a result, ROK forces’ main operation often became a purely search operation in a certain area instead of organized large-scale envelopment operation. Even though at first, they attempted the enveloping movement; then, they spent most of the time focusing on searching and ambushing the enemy forces by staying a long time in a certain area.<sup>89</sup> Here, the actual search and destroy operation was conducted based on small units such as the company, platoon, and squad. General Yoo argued that the small-scale operation demonstrated its strength in ROK forces’ large-scale operations, saying, “[Operation Oh Jac Kyo] proved that even the large-scale operation was conducted based on the company size.”<sup>90</sup> In ROK forces, a company, not a battalion, was the basic unit for even conducting an offensive operation in the Vietnam War.

The Tiger Division’s after-action report wrote, “ROK forces had to execute different tactics from the one of the U.S. forces,” because “the enemy forces had been already adjusted to

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<sup>87</sup> The two divisions even had separate combat after action reports.

<sup>88</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 2, 390.

<sup>89</sup> Park Chöng-won interview, *Chüngönl t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 534-535.

<sup>90</sup> Yoo, *Yoo Byung-hyun chasöjön*, 103.

the U.S. tactics from the U.S. forces' long-term operation in this region."<sup>91</sup> As a consequence, they used "Ban-Jeon [Reversal]," as a tactic to do repetitive search and reconnaissance in the same area.<sup>92</sup> This tactic had been used in the ROK's previous operations, such as Operation Tiger 6 in Phu Cat mountain area, and then they applied it to a larger area by splitting into more companies in Operation Oh Jac Kyo. During Operation Oh Jac Kyo I, once arriving in a certain area with helicopters, ROK companies conducted reconnaissance using covert penetration to give an enemy a surprise impact. Then, they had assigned sections and conducting "put down" operation— stayed in the area and did search operation again and again and sometimes different companies switched the operational area to conduct re-search—rather than sweeping the area with firepower.<sup>93</sup> Although patience was required to the ROK soldier to conduct this kind of tactic, this was effective by finding and giving damage to VC, who had avoided the ROK's offensive at first but became careless after the ROK's first time search.

Still, the U.S. forces revealed some concerns on the Korean operation that ROK troops might have a struggle in conventional fights against the bulk of the North Vietnamese regular troops. Lack of using firepower was one of the most noticeable weaknesses of the ROK forces operation. The U.S. observers wrote, "there was almost no air and artillery fire support during the operation." They understood that this was because the Koreans did not engage with the bulk of the enemy forces so the ROK troops did not need to call for firepower. But the observers also found that "commanders of the small units [like company and platoon] did not actually want to call an artillery fire support close to them [because of the possible damage]."<sup>94</sup> Not only the

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<sup>91</sup> Sudosadan, "Chönt'usangbo che 58 ho: Ojakkyo – 1 ho," HB00105

<sup>92</sup> The Tiger 26th Regiment commander, Col Park Wan-sik interview, 8 July 1980, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 522.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> "Tactics and Techniques used by Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam, DTIC.

small unit level but according to the liaison officers in higher command, they “did not watch the [ROK] higher command’s requesting CAS or AC-47 gunship fire. Therefore, “based on American perspective, this is the ROK forces’ obvious tactical weakness and will influence when they meet the large number of the enemy forces.”<sup>95</sup> The observers also pointed out that the lack of signal equipment and using firepower were deficiencies of ROK’s conduct, and the incapability of using firepower could cause huge problems to ROKs in the big conventional operation, such as “search and destroy.”<sup>96</sup>

In their operations, ROKFV often did not depend on firepower. In Operation Oh Jac Kyo, General Chae banned using artillery fire to the village to protect the people.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, ROK’s small-unit tactics did not entirely depend on firepower or mobile capability. They used helicopters at the initial movement, then walked in the area and stayed for a while based on building company bases. Yet, to find and contact the enemy forces was not easy.<sup>98</sup> In some way, ROK forces tried to overcome the fundamental problem of search and destroy operation—that finding the bulk of the enemy was difficult—by focusing on small-scale operations. The ROK’s search and destroy operations proved that “search and destroy” itself had a certain limitation in pacifying the region. The situations—an uncertain intelligence (credibility) about the main forces of the enemy, invisible enemy forces mixed with civilians, and the enemy who easily escaped by effectively avoiding the attack—made search and destroy the enemy forces difficult. Through

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<sup>95</sup> “Migune ūihan ojakkyo chakchŏn ch'amgwan pogo,” HB00016.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, Kukpangbu Kunsap’yŏnch’anyŏn’guso, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 93; Kim Chi-ho interview, 18 July 1980, Ibid., 142.

<sup>98</sup> Ha Dae-duck, “Pet’ŭnamjŏnesŏ ch’ehŏmhan chŏnt’uhyŏnjangŭi shilchaewa kyohun [The Reality and Lesson of the Battlefield Experienced in the Vietnam War,” *Kunsayŏn’gu* [Journal of Military History Studies] 132 (2011), 283.

their experiences of these two large-scale operations, ROK forces confirmed its difficulties of search and destroy operation.

The U.S. observers realized that the Koreans focused on small-unit tactics without using firepower even in the large-scale search and destroy operation. This actually became ROK's motivation to launch Operation Hong Kil-dong to show their using massive firepower in the large-scale operation. ROKFV itself evaluated Operation Hong Kil-dong as its "first major search and destroy operation attempted by the ROK forces at the outer perimeter of our TAOR."<sup>99</sup> The Tiger Division's after-action report on Operation Hong Kil-dong wrote:

We had focused on building bases, protecting the civilians, and securing the territory after searching the enemy main forces in a certain area until Operation Oh Jac Kyo. However, in Operation Hong Kil-dong, after dividing six operational areas in the vast area, we started the operation in the first operational area, and then moved to the second and third areas based on airmobile and ground movement, [rather than staying in the first area.]<sup>100</sup>

As a result, Operation Hong Kil-dong was the Korean troops' first full-out large-scale search and destroy operation in terms of its conduct, using "firepower and mobility." Despite having a conflict on the matter of using firepower with the commanders, General Chae also emphasized the necessity of attacking the village after Operation Hong Kil-dong.<sup>101</sup> Also, the Korean forces emphasized the offensive, arguing even the company base was mainly for the offensive from its function of the "foothold to an offensive."<sup>102</sup> Even though there was a political intention in their argument that they were aggressive, the Korean forces had already recognized the importance of firepower and mobility for conduct in the Vietnam War. Also, they knew that using firepower

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<sup>99</sup> "MACV Commanders' Conference 24 September 1967," NARA II.

<sup>100</sup> Sudosadan, "Chõnt'usangbo che 69 ho: Hongkildong," HB00106.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> "MACV Commanders' Conference 24 September 1967," NARA II.

would result in not only achieving the superficial results of war such as the body count and kill-ratio but also reducing their casualties. Yet, using the firepower was not their priority, because using it aggressively contradicted their slogan to protect the civilian and emphasis on small-unit tactics. Besides, they had to depend on the U.S. forces for the significant amounts of firepower and mobility to conduct combat operations.

Meanwhile, this U.S. evaluation—the high evaluation of ROK’s performance at the same time low evaluation on using firepower—gave justice for the modernization of the ROK troops, which was one of the main motivations for ROK’s participation. The observer’s report contributed to ROK’s aim to modernize its troops by participating in the war. The U.S. observers showed their surprise that ROK forces achieved a result even being equipped with an old-fashioned personal weapon such as M-1 Garand and M-1 Carbine. For example, a ROK company in the White Horse Division was equipped with 95 Carbine, 24 Garand, and ten M-16 at the start of the operation in March 1967.<sup>103</sup> The observation report strongly suggested that the ROK troops should be equipped with a new M-16 rifle and wear the jungle cloth instead of a thick combat uniform soon. It is unknown what kind of relationship the U.S. observers had with ROK companies; their report justified the Korean forces’ request to arm with modern weapons. As a result, every ROK troop in Vietnam was able to arm with the M-16 by May 1967.<sup>104</sup> With their success as a momentum, the ROK forces sought to modernize its military receiving an M-113 armored personnel carrier (APC), UH-1 helicopter, F-4 Phantom aircraft, and many modern types of equipment from the U.S. during the Vietnam War. At the same, this resulted in pushing them as a justification to fight by following the American concept. For ROKs, fighting in

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<sup>103</sup> 9 sadan, “Chõnt’usangbo che 35 ho: Ojakkyo chakchõn,” HB00010.

<sup>104</sup> Headquarters of U.S. MACV, *Command History 1968*, vol.1, 302, Folder 1, Box 0, Bud Harton Collection, VNCA.

Vietnam was treading the tricky path between interest and justification, in order to justify their interest in this war.

As the Vietnam War was prolonged, the Korean forces became the force to depend on firepower which could give big damage to the enemy with small sacrifices. Lt. Gen. A. S. Collins, Jr, I Field Force Commander (February 1970-January 1971), evaluated ROK forces in his debriefing report in 1971:

The ROK forces are deliberate and methodical in all that they do. Once they undertake a mission, they do a superb job of it. They are aggressive and thorough, and one can be certain that any area they search out has been thoroughly covered. However, they make excessive demands for choppers and [fire] support and once having completed an operation, they frequently stand down for six weeks to two months.<sup>105</sup>

Although depending on firepower became common in the ROK forces' operations, they still did not achieve a good result in typical "search and destroy" operations using firepower. Lt. Gen. Charles A. Corcoran, I Field Force Commander (May 1968-February 1970) evaluated ROK forces' combat operation:

Whereas the Koreans have maintained very high kill ratios, it is a product of professional ambush techniques by well trained and disciplined troops, whether it be done in the lowlands in the defensive screen, or as a part of massive squeeze tactics in base area operations. Their tactic of massive operations with multiple battalions requires considerable expenditure of support with declining returns. The enemy in his attempt to preserve his force seeks to avoid contact and to disperse his forces.<sup>106</sup>

Still, it was ROK's small-unit tactics, that achieved results.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> "Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Lieutenant General A. S. Collins, Jr," 9 February 1971, Reel 4, U.S. Army Senior Officer Debriefing Reports (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>106</sup> "Senior Officer Debriefing Report LTG Charles A. Corcoran," 4 April 1970, Reel 3, U.S. Army Senior Officer Debriefing Reports (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>107</sup> I Field Force, "Analysis of Republic of Korea, Vietnam Small Unit Tactics," 29 September 1967, Reel 17, Richard Nixon National Security Files 1969-1974 (microfilm), VNCA.

The U.S.'s close evaluation also had a limitation in understanding the ROK's conduct in Vietnam. These observation reports showed that the U.S. forces' evaluation of ROK forces was still limited at the tactical level and techniques. Even though the ROK forces did (or argued that they did) a different kind of war from the U.S. forces at the strategic and operational level, the U.S. forces' evaluation was focused on ROK's conduct in search and destroy operation rather than evaluating ROK's pacification efforts. At that time, it was the U.S. newspaper that paid attention to ROK's different efforts in Vietnam.<sup>108</sup> Operation Oh Jac Kyo was supposed to be search and destroy operation and thus, it was a good evaluation subject for the U.S. forces. This became the main reason that the U.S. observation was only for the first two weeks where ROK forces mainly conducted a "search and destroy" type of operation. They were not interested in the latter part, where pacification efforts such as securing and civil affairs operations were ROKs' main focus, and this was excluded from the observation. As a result, the U.S. forces understood the Koreans superficially. The vice commander of ROKFV, Brig. Gen. Choi Dae-myŏng, said, "the U.S. forces only saw us on the tactical level," arguing, "Americans cannot do well what we're doing because of the cultural difference."<sup>109</sup> This was another characteristic of the Vietnam War. Despite their fights with the same weapon and the tactic and doctrine learned from the U.S., they did not fight in the same way as the U.S. Army. The Koreans fought differently from the Americans.

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<sup>108</sup> For more details, see Chapter 5.

<sup>109</sup> Choi Dae-myŏng interview, 3 September 1968, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet 'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukun*, vol.1, 135

## Chapter 5

### “Half Success”: The ROKFV’s Pacification Efforts in the Vietnam War

#### Incompatible View: The Evaluation of ROKFV’s Pacification

What is pacification in the Vietnam War? Former ARVN Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho wrote:

Pacification is the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or reestablishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy’s underground government, the assertion or re-assertion of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion. Defined as such, pacification is a broad and complex strategic concept which encompasses many fields of national endeavor. As a program implemented jointly with the U.S. military effort in South Vietnam, pacification appears to have involved every American serviceman and civilian who served there, many of whom indeed participated in conceiving the idea and helping put it to work.<sup>1</sup>

During the Korean War, the ROK Army conducted a series of counterinsurgency operations in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. Among them, from December 1951 to March 1952, General Paik directed Operation Rat Killer to destroy the guerilla troops in Mountain Chiri. Paik states his plan, “We jumped off on time, and thirty thousand troops moved out briskly toward the peaks, closing the net. Our concept was as simple as a rabbit hunt.” Here are more details:

The strike force was composed of the two divisions surrounding the Chiri redoubt. Each unit on the perimeter was to attack along parallel approaches to Mount Chiri itself. The blocking force was composed of reserve regiments and police units positioned astride roads and escape routes just outside the strike force’s tightening net. I was determined to pull the net closed on the guerrillas, and this blocking force was to neutralize those who managed to worm their way through the net. As the

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<sup>1</sup> Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), V.

strike force advanced, we burned abandoned structures and guerilla facilities we discovered in the mountains to prevent the guerrillas from using them again, we evacuated civilian residents to a relief station.<sup>2</sup>

The South Korean forces' experiences of the pacification during the Korean War focused on primarily military efforts. However, pacification efforts in Vietnam should be a broad strategic concept that encompasses many fields of national endeavor. This chapter eventually finds out how their pacification experience in the Korean War connected to their pacification efforts in the Vietnam War.

The ultimate goal of allied forces' pacification was that the South Vietnamese authority would gain control over its people and country from VC and North Vietnamese threat.<sup>3</sup> To achieve this, the 1967 Combined Campaign Plan reconfirmed that the U.S. forces focused on destroying the main enemy forces by search and destroy operation, while the South Vietnamese forces were taking charge of pacification operations including clearing and securing operations. The U.S. forces wanted the ROK forces to have the same priority as they did in destroying VC, while the South Vietnamese including the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the regional forces focused on the clearing and security operations for the pacification. However, the South Vietnamese, especially its regional forces, were lacking quality, discipline, and efficiency, and therefore, were ineffective in seizing the region for pacification.<sup>4</sup> In such situations, the Korean forces were able to focus more on pacification moving between the U.S. and South Vietnamese missions. The Koreans still generally focused on securing an area, and even many of their large-scale operations were not a search and destroy but a clearing operation. As a result of

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<sup>2</sup> Gen. Paik Sun Yup, *From Pusan to Panmunjom* (New York: Brassey's, 1992), 186.

<sup>3</sup> "Military Assistance Command Vietnam, and Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, Combined Campaign Plan 1967," Folder 14, Box 5, Larry Berman Collection, VNCA; "Military Participation in Revolutionary Development," November 1966, Folder 9, Box 4, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the efforts, the South Koreans expanded their TAOR: 1,535 square kilometers in 1965, 4,470 square kilometers in 1966, and 6,800 square kilometers in 1967.<sup>5</sup> They also secured one of the most populated and strategic regions—Phu Yen and Binh Dinh, the eastern coast of South Vietnam—as “their TAOR protects over 90 percent of the population living along the coast between the northern and southern limits of the TAOR.”<sup>6</sup>

As discussed in the early chapters, the ROK forces’ strategy for the conduct in the Vietnam War was to focus on the pacification. Yet, there is almost no research about the reality of the Korean forces’ pacification or counterinsurgency (COIN) operations during the war.<sup>7</sup> In terms of pacification, widely-known South Korea’s Vietnam War literature depicts Korean soldiers as mercenaries of the U.S. and victims of the war and ROK military who forced them to fight and kill good people.<sup>8</sup> The debate regarding Korean soldiers’ massacre and atrocities is located at the center of this claim: some scholars argue that ROK soldiers deliberately killed civilians in Vietnam, while most veterans say that did not happen during the war.<sup>9</sup>

During 1966 and 1967, it was the U.S. news media who gave a high spotlight to the ROK forces’ pacification efforts. Their compliments for the Koreans’ pacification operation originated from Americans’ skepticism of their conduct in Vietnam. The American public was confused

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<sup>5</sup> Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *T'onggyero pon pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Statistics of the Vietnam War and the Korean Forces] (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso, 2007), 163.

<sup>6</sup> “Senior Officer Debriefing Report,” 31 July 1967, AD513366, DTIC.

<sup>7</sup> Only two researches are available. Choi Yong-ho, “Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaengesŏ han'gukkunŭi chakchŏn mit minsashimnijŏn suhaengbangbŏpkwa kyŏlgwa [A Study on the Military Operations, Civil Affairs & Psychological Operations of the ROK Armed Forces During the Vietnam War],” Ph.D. diss., Kyonggi University, 2005; Ban Kil-joo, “The Reliable Promise of Middle Power Fighters: The ROK Military’s COIN Success in Vietnam and Iraq,” Ph.D. diss., Arizona State University, 2011. However, the analysis of these researches is superficial because they describe only the success of ROK’s COIN operations during the Vietnam War.

<sup>8</sup> Ahn Jung-hyo, *White Badge: A Novel of Korea* (New York: Soho Press, 1989); Sok-yong Hwang, *The Shadow of Arms*, trans. Kyung-ja Chun (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> For more details see: Han Hong-koo, “Massacre Breeds Massacre,” *Hankyoreh* 21, 4 May 2000, 26; Charles K. Armstrong, “America’s Korea, Korea’s Vietnam,” *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (2001): 527-539; Park Tae-gyun, *Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaeng* [The Vietnam War] (Seoul: Han'gyŏrye ch'ulp'an, 2015).

and suspicious about the progress of the war. Despite putting lots of troops and resources into the war and Washington's declaration that the war was being won, the U.S. force casualties continued to mount, and the war seen on television looked miserable. There was a question about the U.S. forces' conduct in Vietnam even inside the military; however, the U.S. forces in Vietnam continued to emphasize on search and destroy operations using overwhelming firepower.<sup>10</sup> Public doubts on the U.S. forces' conduct in Vietnam did not wane and they eventually turned their backs against the war efforts over the 1968 Tet Offensive.

The U.S. media discovered the Koreans' conduct in the Vietnam War as an alternative model for the U.S. forces. Journalist John Randolph in the *Los Angeles Times* threw a provocative question, "What if it should be the South Koreans, and not the Americans, who find out how to win the Vietnam War?" He suggested the U.S. forces learn from the Koreans forces who "have had remarkable success" in the Vietnam War with different methods from them.<sup>11</sup> In his interview with *U.S. News & World Report*, General Chae claimed:

I don't think that only the Koreans can fight so well. The U.S., Australian and South Vietnam troops have done a wonderful job. They're fighting soldiers. But we believe that this war cannot be concluded only by military means. The most important thing, I think, is to get to the people—make them believe in the future, and instill confidence in their own Government. Strategy is based on how to control people. The Viet Cong cannot live without other people's support. So our effort, military and other wise, must concentrate on separating the Viet Cong from the rest of the people.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Department of the Army, A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam (PROVN), vol.1, March 1966, AD377743, DTIC; Ibid., vol 2, AD 377744, DTIC. In April 1966, PROVN, a study by U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, raised serious questions about General Westmoreland's way of war in Vietnam. By arguing that war of attrition based on search and destroy would not work as an effective strategy for the Vietnam War, this study proposed that U.S. efforts should be focusing on pacification by providing security and stability for the rural population in South Vietnam. However, At the time of its publication, PROVN was largely dismissed by military commanders. For more details about PROVN, See: Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of Military History* 72, no. 4 (2008): 1213-1247.

<sup>11</sup> John Randolph, "S. Koreans Get Results on Viet 'Home Front'," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 September 1966.

<sup>12</sup> "A Korean General Tells How to Beat the Viet Cong," *U.S. News & World Report*, 15 May 1967, Folder 18, Box 33, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

Introducing General Chae's idea on the pacification, *U.S. News & World Report* argued that the U.S. forces should learn from the ROK forces whose pacification efforts were the most effective of any other troops in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

First, the U.S. newspapers recognized that the ROK forces' main role in Vietnam of securing and helping pacify the area, was successful. Arthur Mohr, in an article in the *New York Times*, concluded, "[ROK] troops successfully fulfill their mission to make war regions secure."<sup>14</sup> Randolph in the *Los Angeles Times* argued that the Korean forces' difference was apparent in pacification, explaining that the significant differences between the two forces were not in the fighting in battle but in the method of pacification which "lies between beating the guerillas in open battle and restoring the people to loyalty and prosperity."<sup>15</sup> Second, ROK's pacification efforts were regarded as methodologically effective. By interviewing General Chae, *U.S. News & World Report* argued that the ROK's operational concept of "hold-separate-destroy" was effective, because by holding its troops long in the region, Koreans could provide security to the people by separating Vietcong from local people.<sup>16</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* argued that "the Koreans have had successes by using means that are novel, or at least little used by either the Americans or South Vietnamese." As one of the instances, he suggested that the Koreans "take a much more black-and-white, 'you're either for us or against us' attitude toward the VC and the population."<sup>17</sup>

Third, the U.S. newspapers suggested a unique argument that South Koreans, being Asian as well as the Vietnamese, had a natural advantage for the pacification. They contended that the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Mohr, "South Koreans' Role in Vietnam is Defensive One," *New York Times*, 31 August 1966.

<sup>15</sup> "S. Koreans Get Results on Viet 'Home Front'," *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>16</sup> "A Korean General Tells How to Beat the Viet Cong," *U.S. News & World Report*, VNCA.

<sup>17</sup> "S. Koreans Get Results on Viet 'Home Front'," *Los Angeles Times*.

Koreans won the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. As the key to success in pacification, Mohr in the *New York Times* argued that the Korean soldiers received credit from the Vietnamese due to their enthusiasm and firmness in addition to the fellow-Asians perception.<sup>18</sup> Michael Wall in the *Washington Post* gave a similar view on the ROK forces' success in pacification:

The divisional commander ceaselessly emphasizes that it is just as important to win over the Vietnamese [mind] as to kill the Vietcong. Every Korean soldier has this drummed into him day by day. "We believe the Vietnamese are our brothers," an officer said, "and we try to treat them this way. It makes no difference whether they have been with the Vietcong or not." It is of course easier for the Asians to understand and sympathize with the Vietnamese customs and attitudes of mind than it is for the Americans, who tend to get irritated, frustrated and finally angry with Vietnamese inefficiency and procrastinations.<sup>19</sup>

By comparing with an American approach, Wall described the Koreans' approach to the Vietnamese people worked for winning the hearts and minds of the population. Randolph listed three out of four factors related to the cultural homogeneity in explaining ROK's uniqueness for pacification in Vietnam:

1. As members of a common culture, the Koreans are far better equipped in handling the Vietnamese, individually or in groups.
2. As dedicated and politically conscious anti-Communists, who successfully survived the same kind of crisis now threatening Vietnam, the Koreans have a missionary zeal that carries conviction and ... provides an example the Vietnamese can realistically hope to follow.
3. Again as East Asians, the Koreans know how to generate ... that goes well with the majority of Vietnamese.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "South Koreans' Role in Vietnam is Defensive One," *New York Times*.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Wall, "Koreans Effective in Vietnam," *Washington Post*, 24 March 1967.

<sup>20</sup> "S. Koreans Get Results on Viet 'Home Front'," *Los Angeles Times*.

He argued that cultural similarity was the key to ROK's success in pacification, saying, "the Koreans, moreover, have a great advantage over the Americans in that they are East Asians," who had the same Chinese Confucian culture.

The Korean forces gained a reputation for their effectiveness in pacification, and a myth was created that the ROK forces won the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese population. However, as pacification became the main effort of the Vietnam War, the ROK forces' methods were reexamined. Overall, the U.S. forces saw the ROK pacification efforts received mixed ratings, arguing that the Korean efforts were effective in an early stage of the war, but more questions were raised in the later period after mid-1968.<sup>21</sup> More research is required to understand why the U.S. evaluation of ROK forces' pacification had changed, but two factors in the latter half of the war assumably affected: (1) Pacification became the main efforts of the war as the U.S. forces' switching focus on pacification based on CORDS' coordinated effort; (2) The South Koreans' deterioration of morale and discipline and a passive attitude as an accelerating Vietnamization.

The U.S. forces arguably switched their efforts into more pacification after 1968 under the new leadership of General Creighton Abrams.<sup>22</sup> The pacification efforts by all different institutions were integrated into the one institution, the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) under the direction of MACV command.<sup>23</sup> It was

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<sup>21</sup> Stanley R. Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975), 157.

<sup>22</sup> For more details about the discussion on the change of the U.S. strategy during the Vietnam War, See: Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999); Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>23</sup> CORDS, created on 9 May 1967, was a pacification program including both military and civilian components of governments of the U.S. and South Vietnam. For more details see: Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1999).

not until the CORDS' study that the U.S. forces in earnest evaluated ROK forces' pacification efforts. On 13 October 1968, Evaluations Branch, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, CORDS, published the study of ROK pacification techniques, titled, "Evaluation Report: ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs II Corps Tactical Zone."<sup>24</sup>

This study gives a valuable perspective to understand the ROK forces' pacification. From 5 July to 23 August 1968, with the ROK Command agreement to permit a study, the U.S. officials were able to observe two ROK army divisions' activities and pacifications efforts deployed in one autonomous city and four provinces. In addition to the observation, this study included opinions of those who had been watching and experiencing the Koreans' pacification for a long time—such as the U.S. field evaluators, U.S. senior advisors, ROKA officers, South Vietnamese chiefs from 14 districts, and South Vietnamese evaluators, and 182 citizens from 34 hamlets. The objective of this 94 pages long study was explained: "the study would NOT take the form of a critical evaluation of ROK forces or their pacification techniques but rather would be a comparative study of aspects of the ROK program which might result in ideas useful to US forces and advisors."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the study was actually close to an evaluation of ROK forces' pacification; yet it was credible because of its' balanced view in terms of covering both the strength and weakness of ROK's pacification efforts.

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<sup>24</sup> CORDS Evaluation Branch, "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," 13 October 1968, Box 11, CORDS, Pacification Studies Group Offices Files of Henry Lee Braddock 1968-1975, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>25</sup> "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," NARA II.

### Systematic Efforts: The Effectiveness of the ROKFV's Pacification

According to the CORDS study, the South Korean Army well provided security of their assigned area; but their efforts did not reach a higher level of pacification which was the goal of CORDS' pacification efforts, in which the governmental authorities would find firm control of the region. Overall, the study evaluated ROKFV's pacification as follows:

Security provided by ROK units is generally excellent, but their contributions to the upgrading of GVN territorial units exhaust a scant fraction of their capacity. Coordination on tactical security measures is limited and reflects a predisposition of ROK commanders to stubborn unilateralism.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike other arguments that the Koreans' pacification was flawless, this study concluded that the Korean forces' way had a certain limitation. Even though their operation offered "tactical security," it was "counterproductive to [CORDS'] pacification programs."<sup>27</sup>

Yet, the CORDS' study at least admitted that ROK's efforts were effective in providing security to the population—which is the prerequisite for a successful pacification, as without the security generated by military force, pacification cannot even be attempted.<sup>28</sup> It stated, "Security in the hamlets which lie within or close by ROK battalion AO's has improved dramatically since the arrival of the Korean contingents," based on the Vietnamese evaluator's review of the recent history of VC activity.<sup>29</sup> Being unable to provide security to the South Vietnamese has been

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The most recent published U.S. Army FM 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* listed the legitimacy of the government, which can provide security and acts in the best interest of its people, as the first strategic principle of the counterinsurgency. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-24: Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington D.C.: Headquarters, Department of Army, 2 June 2014), chapter 1, 19. For more details about this discussion see: Dale Andrade and James H. Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future," *Military Review* 86, no. 2 (2006): 9-23.

<sup>29</sup> "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," 18, NARA II.

regarded as one of the reasons for the allied forces' failure in Vietnam. In 1961, before the Americanization of the Vietnam War started, Robert Thompson, the British military officer who had played a major role in the successful British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya, suggested that the political stability and security of the populated rural areas, not the destruction of VC forces, should be the focus of operations in Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> However, the U.S. forces focused on destroying the enemy forces based on a big unit war, and it arguably was not successful in the pacification of South Vietnam.<sup>31</sup>

Even in the second half of the Vietnam War, the ROK forces were regarded as effective in an area security approach. The U.S. forces estimated, "The Koreans, for example, by using these tactics have apparently transformed 300 kilometers of the most contested coastal areas into one of the most secure areas in Vietnam."<sup>32</sup> Then, how were the South Korean forces able to provide security to the local population? South Korean forces attempted to expand the pacified area, following their strategy to focus on pacification. Once they pacified an assigned area, then they moved to another area to pacify, after handing over the securing mission to the South Vietnamese regional forces.

Although ROK generals, including General Chae, claimed that their pacification concept of "spreading oil spot" was original; it was not true. ROKFV's pacification strategy could be found

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 67.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. Andrew F. Krepinevich argues that the U.S. Army did not recognize the war of insurgency in Vietnam, and thus its approach of fighting the conventional war was not effective in providing the security to the people and failed in pacification. Also, Richard A. Hunt states that although offering security to the people was the basis in pacification operations in Vietnam, the U.S. forces failed to provide it and therefore did not win the hearts and minds of the people. Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Perseus, 1998). On the other hand, Dale Andrade and James H. Willbanks argue that "to conclude that large-scale operations play no role in COIN is a mistake," explaining that "the big-unit war in 1965 and 1966 robbed the communists of a quick victory and allowed the South Vietnamese breathing space in which to begin pacifying the countryside." Dale Andrade and James H. Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future," 11.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum from Herman Kahn to Henry Kissinger, "Vietnam," 2 July 1969, Reel 17, Richard Nixon National Security Files 1969-1974 (microfilm).

in South Vietnam's pacification concept in 1964 as the Chien Thang (Victory) National Pacification Plan published in 1964 stated:

[This plan] established the 'spreading oil spot' concept for its two phases—restoration of security (clearing and securing), and development—and outlined military support for the 1964 pacification effort, but the overall military and civil aspects of the 1964 pacification plan lacked coordination.<sup>33</sup>

This was the pacification plan replaced the Strategic Hamlet Program, stressing an integrated civil-military approach based on the estimation of only a small portion of the former strategic hamlets were under the South Vietnamese governmental control. However, it did not go well.<sup>34</sup> Compared to the South Vietnamese previous plan, the Korean forces had a systematic and firm idea, applying their human resources and materials into the limited assigned area.

The ROK forces' pacification efforts functioned as a single system in their conduct in the Vietnam War. Their focus on pacification was consistent and did not vary between combat and non-combat conditions. As discussed early chapters, ROKs' small unit tactics, such as nighttime ambushes and daytime patrols were to detect VC and separate them from people.<sup>35</sup> Even in the offensive large-scale operations, their conduct was based on taking control of the people. The U.S. newspaper gave an insightful statement:

The men of the Tiger Division, like the U.S. Marines in the north, have an initial advantage in operating outward from a static base. Their "search and destroy" operations are not solely designed to smash Vietcong units but to enlarge their perimeter, bring more of the country under their direct control. Thus they know, and more important the Vietnamese villagers know, that they will not pull back and leave the area again to the mercy of the Vietcong.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> U.S. MACV, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, February 1968, 3, Folder 8, Box 1, Peter Swartz Collection, VNCA.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. MACV, *Command History 1964*, 65-69, a955106, DTIC; Headquarters of U.S. MACV, *Command History 1968*, vol.1, 302, Folder 1, Box 0, Bud Harton Collection, VNCA.

<sup>35</sup> "Three-Part Basic Program for Successful Vietnamization," VNCA.

<sup>36</sup> "Koreans Effective in Vietnam," *Washington Post*.

While the American forces fought based on the conventional concept of search and destroy the bulk of enemy forces with using firepower, the Koreans' operational concept was to destroy the isolated enemy forces based on their three stages of operation, "hold-separate-destroy." The U.S. Army Maj. Ronald R. Rasmussen observed in the 1968 Military Review:

Soon after arrival in a new area, ROK companies construct company bases and conducted every day extensive patrols and ambushes. At the same time, ROK companies initiate what is called the "sister program." Under this program, the company assumes responsibility for the security of hamlets in a specific area and provides limited assistance to the people to improve conditions. This helps to establish rapport with the people, resulting in a steady flow of intelligence on the Viet Cong and their sympathizers.<sup>37</sup>

As Rasmussen observed, the essence of the ROKs' military operation was to separate the VC from the people by holding troops long in one area. A New York Times article describes that "once the Fierce Tigers enter a Vietcong area they will not withdraw."<sup>38</sup> Based on this purpose, companies were scattered and stationed in an area by building the company base and conducting both small-scale combat and civil-affairs operations. As a result, this operational and tactical system oriented to pacification enabled the ROK forces to provide security to the local people.

Meanwhile, it is difficult to ignore the ROK forces a favorable condition for focusing on pacification. Even though ROKs' territory of the east coast of Vietnam was the populated and strategically important area, their area was safer, receiving a less full-scale attack from the enemy forces, compared to other areas like the 17th Parallel and the Cambodian border inside the same II CTZ. Also, the Koreans had a condition to concentrate most of their efforts in fairly

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<sup>37</sup> Major Ronald R. Rasmussen, "ROK Operations in Central Vietnam," *Military Review* 48, no. 1 (1968), 55.

<sup>38</sup> "South Korean Units Use Big Sticks in Vietnam Pacification Drive," *New York Times*, 13 February 1967.

restricted areas and focus on pacification without having a big burden on the large-scale conventional type military operation, because they received “a degree of protection by mobile US element operating against enemy concentrations on their western flank.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, the enemy forces’ intentional avoidance of engaging with the ROK forces was an important factor for their solid control of people. South Koreans were regarded as marginal agencies among the allied troops, compared to the Americans and South Vietnamese, and fighting with them required high blood loss because of ROK forces’ fierceness. Thus, for VC and North Vietnamese forces, the Korean forces came to be recognized as an unattractive target to fight, considering the input and result of the engagement, and they intentionally avoided the engagement with the ROK forces unless they greatly overwhelmed the Koreans.

Still, the CORDS’ study concluded that the ROK’s efforts had a certain limitation for accomplishing the high level of pacification because of the Koreans’ unilateralism. Since the highest aim for the pacification was to win the hearts and minds of the people, more analysis is required as to whether the ROK forces were able to achieve this. In fact, ROKFV claimed that they gained loyalty from the people as a result of its pacification efforts. General Chae emphasized protecting the life and property of the local people as to be ROK’s priority even in the military operation, following their guideline of “to protect one civilian even if losing a hundred Viet Cong.”<sup>40</sup> This guideline did not play a role simply as a political slogan, but it actually affected ROK’s combat and pacification operations. The Cavalry Regimental commander, Col. Sin Hyun-su, stated, “while the U.S. forces sweep the village, we restrain

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>40</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 21 August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 93.

entering the village. We did operation threatening them out of the village to attack them.<sup>41</sup> After receiving lots of casualties entering the village without the artillery support, The 3rd Platoon Leader of the 8th Company in the White Horse 29th Regiment, Lt. Oh In-sub criticized General Chae's order to protect the civilians, describing it as "reckless," in the situation of a large number of enemy troops having already penetrated into the village.<sup>42</sup> When the ROK commanders protested to Chae for forbidding the artillery fire to the village of Ninhhoa during Operation Bulldozer 3 in October 1967, Chae responded, "the strategic victory can make up for the tactical failure, but the tactical victory can't make up the strategic failure."<sup>43</sup> Lt. Kim Hyung-suk, dispatched in Vietnam between 1966 and 1968 as a platoon leader, argued that this policy should have been accepted as a political slogan, not as a real operational policy. He suggested that this operational policy was unrealistic because if friendly forces should risk sacrifice to protect civilians, this policy often became poison for soldiers.<sup>44</sup> Lt. Gen. Lee Se-ho, who became a new ROKFV commander in 1969, criticized this policy for weakening the ROK forces' fighting spirit.<sup>45</sup> As a result, the criticism on General Chae's slogan to protect the people paradoxically showed that this actually functioned as a guideline for ROK's operations.

The priority in ROK forces' operation was to isolate and destroy the VC instead of directly destroying them. General Chae argued that "high body count must not be desirable in this kind of war."<sup>46</sup> Together with their internal idea of reducing the sacrifice, to destroy the VC

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<sup>41</sup> Sin Hyun-su interview, *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> Oh In-sub interview, *Ibid.*, vol.2, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 93. The 1st Battalion commander, Lt. Col. Lee Young-woo admitted the conflict between General Chae and the 9th Division commander, Maj. Gen. Lee So-dong. Lt. Col. Lee said, "it was difficult to achieve national prestige, reducing casualties, and maximum result, all together at the same time." Lee Young-woo interview, 13 August 1980, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 2, 149.

<sup>44</sup> Kim Hyung-suk, *Sŏktoŭi t'uhon* [Fighting Spirit of Sekdo] (Seoul: Jisikgonggam, 2016), 160-162.

<sup>45</sup> For more details, see Chapter 7.

<sup>46</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 90.

was not necessarily a priority for the Korean operations. Thus, as discussed previously, the Korean forces used a measuring system, recognizing captured weapons as an outcome. Maj. Rasmussen witnessed:

Of particular interest is the Korean philosophy concerning the conduct of the overall conflict. The killing of the Viet Cong, or “body count,” is played down. What is emphasized is the number of weapons captured. A careful study of Korean battle statistics reveals a kill-to weapons-captured ratio of one to 2.1. Many Korean commanders say that this is the true indication of success in a struggle with guerrillas. The Koreans reason that, when you take weapons, you deny the guerrilla his means to wield power over the people; therefore, he is ineffective.<sup>47</sup>

This unique measuring system not only motivated soldiers to search for the enemy forces and weapons persistently but also enabled them to apply the “black and white” policy, which Randolph introduced as ROK’s unique method for the pacification of the village, in clearing operations such as searching the village. As originating from their experience in the counter-insurgency operation to the guerilla forces during the Korean War, the “black and white” policy was to divide South Vietnamese into either Vietcong or civilians in their hamlet operation.<sup>48</sup>

The essence of the “black and white” policy was to screen and evacuate the people before starting a clearing operation in the hamlet. General Westmoreland described: “The Koreans were particularly effective in cordon-and-search operations surrounding villages by stealth, then allowing the people to leave and conducting methodical searches for arms and guerrillas.”<sup>49</sup> The Military Review specified the process:

A technique frequently employed to ferret out the guerrilla from the local population is to broadcast in advance the fact that ROK forces intend to operate in a certain area. The villagers are told to gather at preselected points where they are carefully screened. The Viet on gals are told to lay down their arms. The point is emphasized

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<sup>47</sup> Rasmussen, “ROK Operations in Central Vietnam,” *Military Review*, 55.

<sup>48</sup> For more details see: Gen. Paik Sun Yup, *From Pusan to Panmunjom* (New York: Brassey’s, 1992), 185-194.

<sup>49</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 257.

that the Koreans come in peace and that the responsibility for any bloodshed must be borne by the Viet Cong and their sympathizers. This thorough screening has paid dividends.<sup>50</sup>

During Operation Oh Jac Kyo, the U.S. observers evaluated that there were no civilian casualties in ROK's search and cordon operation of the village.<sup>51</sup> The *New York Times* described this as an innovative method in which the Koreans moved the populations out of areas in which they were conducting large military operations, arguing that this method was less harsh than leaving people in the hamlets and shooting them up with Vietcong.<sup>52</sup> Although the evacuation and the removal of all Vietnamese from their homes brought controversy, in terms of causing civilian casualties, ROK's way might cause fewer casualties than American troops' way which gave only warning without thorough evacuation of the people before launching the operation in the village.

The Koreans regarded civil affairs operations as important as combat operations to win the hearts and minds of the people. In the early years of the Korean forces' participation, the U.S. forces had recognized the Korean civil-affairs operation as follows:

Republic of Korea Forces, Vietnam are continuing a vigorous, well-planned Civic Action Program. The Program includes road and bridges construction and rehabilitation, school and dispensary construction and rehabilitation, refugee assistance, orphanage assistance, dispensary operation, food distribution, and hospital care. ... The program is enthusiastically received by the Vietnamese.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, later in the middle of 1969, U.S. forces devalued the ROK's civil-affairs operation, arguing, "ROKFV civic action programs are aimed at intelligence gathering rather

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<sup>50</sup> Rasmussen, "ROK Operations in Central Vietnam," *Military Review*, 55

<sup>51</sup> Headquarters I Field Force Vietnam to US Observers for Operation Oh Jac Kyo, "Letter of Instructions," 12 March 1967, AD390963, DTIC.

<sup>52</sup> "South Koreans' Role in Vietnam is Defensive One," *New York Times*.

<sup>53</sup> "Free World Military Assistance Highlights," 8 January 1966, Box 47, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

than efforts to assist the people.”<sup>54</sup> In fact, depending on the circumstances of the war, ROK forces even put more effort into civil-affairs than the combat operation. According to the two ROKFV headquarter staff officers, the ratio of the effort between civil affairs and combat operations were at first 50:50, but 70:30 in 1968, and became 90:10 in 1969.<sup>55</sup>

In terms of ROK forces’ Vietnamese ability, “the Korean regimental commanders are steering for a prescribed level of two enlisted linguists per rifle company and ten per battalion.” According to the CORDS’ study, “the Vietnamese language training program of the ROK forces in Vietnam is the best of any foreign expeditionary force in RVN in terms of providing assets to line units.”<sup>56</sup> For example, when Capt. Jang Chan-kyu went to the language school in Saigon for three months, he had a chance to stay in a Vietnamese home, which was very helpful for him to learn not only language but also the culture. Lt. Kim Hyung-suk, went to the language school of the White Horse Division with 30 other officers. During the twelve weeks, he learned the culture as well from the Vietnamese instructor, which prepared him to work as civic-action officer (S-5) of the 2nd Battalion of the 30th Regiments.<sup>57</sup> Soldiers as well went to the language schools in the division or regiment for six months, and as a result of language training, in addition to having a close liaison (Vietnamese) between ROK company elements and the local population, “at least one member of each company speaks Vietnamese, giving the force an on-the-spot communication capability when combing an area.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Memorandum for Deputy Secretary of Defense, “Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROKFV),” 12 August 1969, Box 2, Historians Background Material Files, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>55</sup> Han Min-sök interview, August 1969, *Chüngönül t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 126-127; Baek Haeng-keol interview, *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>56</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” 9, NARA II.

<sup>57</sup> Kim, *Söktoüi t’uhon*, 151-152; *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>58</sup> Rasmussen, “ROK Operations in Central Vietnam,” *Military Review*, 54.

One of their unique programs in pacification was teaching Taekwondo to Vietnamese people, as the CORDS' study evaluated that this was "the most unique and most ambitious nontactical program."<sup>59</sup> General Westmoreland wrote, "[Taekwondo] in which all limbs and the head serve as weapons, and [Koreans] introduced tae-kon-do in the ARVN and among Vietnamese youth as civic action program."<sup>60</sup> The CORDS study also evaluated that the Taekwondo program could be directly related to their pacification programs. General Chae argued that "the role of teaching Taekwondo was to put Korea's spirit to the Vietnamese making them understand to be strong like this way."<sup>61</sup> Even though the program's primary mission was to get information on VC and its activities; above all, ROK forces were also able to interact with people through Taekwondo.

### **"Win Hearts and Minds!": The Fundamental Limitation of ROK's Pacification**

What was the Vietnamese response to the Korean pacification efforts? First of all, the Vietnamese' perception of the Korean soldier is important to understand their response. The overall image of the Korean soldier was brave, firm, and fierce during the Vietnam War. Most of the American veterans of the Vietnam War, based on their direct and indirect experience with the Koreans, remember the Korean soldiers as excellent but fierce, commenting, "they were a goddam good soldier."<sup>62</sup> Maj. Rasmussen described:

"[Korean soldiers were] undoubtedly one of the best soldiers in the Free World. Tough, aggressive, well disciplined, patient, persistent, and thorough, he keeps his equipment in top condition and responds almost instinctively to orders and

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<sup>59</sup> "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," 9, NARA II.

<sup>60</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 257.

<sup>61</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, 13 March 1970, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 90.

<sup>62</sup> Based on my survey in the Facebook Vietnam War group, "VietnamWarHistoryOrg," every American veterans who had direct and indirect contact with the Korean soldiers in Vietnam replied that the Koreans were excellent but fierce soldiers. I'll add their replies here soon.

instructions. One U.S. officer called Korean soldier, “the epitome of a soldier, almost faultless.”<sup>63</sup>

The CORDS study agreed with the Korean soldier’s strength, “The Koreans have built a solid reputation in II CTZ for industry, dogged persistence, unilateralism, and independence.”<sup>64</sup> It even evaluated, “Korean soldiers are far better behaved than Vietnamese troops and somewhat better than US personnel.”<sup>65</sup> As discussed in the U.S. forces’ observation during Operation Oh Jac Kyo and the U.S. newspapers’ evaluations, the individual soldier was regarded as a key to the Koreans’ success not only in combat but also in pacification operations.

However, the bravery and fierceness were often interpreted as the image of brutality. One U.S. document concluded: “Although the Koreans have the reputation among Vietnamese for ferocity when engaging the enemy, their independence and brutal conduct toward the population has harmed relations with RVNAF.”<sup>66</sup> Later in 1972, *The Washington Post* commented on the Korean soldier, “Since their arrival almost seven years ago, they have gained a reputation as fierce fighters who deal sternly, even brutally, with their enemies.”<sup>67</sup> It continued to delineate:

But their reputation is somewhat less benevolent than their official policy. One American who has been in Vietnam for a decade and has seen the Koreans in action many times said, “The ROKs are very cruel, even to their own people. I have seen one officer slap another across the face, in front of the troops.” ... [One officer said,] “I remember one time they caught a Vietnamese stealing from one of their hootches. They bound him up tight in barbed wire and took him in the back of a truck to his village. The village was at the bottom of a hill and they just rolled him down, wrapped in the barbed wire. They didn’t have any trouble after that.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Rasmussen, “ROK Operations in Central Vietnam,” *Military Review*, 54.

<sup>64</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” NARA II.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, NARA II.

<sup>66</sup> “Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROKFV),” NARA II.

<sup>67</sup> “The Fierce Koreans of Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, 20 August 1972.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

Similarly, few months before the ROK forces left Vietnam, another article in the *Washington Post* described “a missed reputation” of the Koreans: “South Vietnamese and American military officials consider them a high disciplined and efficient fighting force. But to many South Vietnamese civilians the Korean soldier has a reputation for excessive ferocity.”<sup>69</sup>

ROKFV itself did not deny this kind of brutal image, emphasizing three-part code of conduct: “To be a Tai-han [Korean] who is brave and fearsome to the enemy, polite and kind to the Vietnamese people, well disciplined and reliable to our allies.”<sup>70</sup> Also, the Koreans’ effort to spread and instruct the Korean martial art Taekwondo to entire South Vietnam, was their effort to gain the valiant image. Col. Son Jang-rae, G-3 of ROKFV, said, “By broadcasting that [ROK forces] were smashing rock and breaking the neck with their fists, we tried to give a sense of fear to the enemy forces and enhance the trust with the people.”<sup>71</sup> ROK forces often used their fierce image as a psychological effect to separate Vietcong from people and made the Vietcong hardly dare to attack them. The CORDS’ study discussed that the ROKFV strived to promote their image as “unlimited power, ferocity and bravery, with a healthy dose of individual resourcefulness,” but “essentially it conveyed an implicit capacity for harsh brutality [towards people].”<sup>72</sup>

When the first group of the Korean combat troops arrived in Vietnam, there was apathy among the Vietnamese toward South Koreans. Both Capt. Lee Man-jin and Bae Kook-jong, who came to Vietnam as the first group of the Tiger Division’s company commander, remembered

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Fathers, “Korean Troops in Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, 16 November 1972..

<sup>70</sup> Chuwölsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Chönghun* [Troop Information and Education], 1970, 2, HB01711.

<sup>71</sup> Son Jang-rae interview, 2 September 1968, *Chüngönül t’onghae pon pet ’ünam chönjaenggwa han ’gukkun*, vol.1, 120.

<sup>72</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” 52-53, NARA II.

that the people were standing with a blank look on their face without welcoming the Koreans.<sup>73</sup>

In the early period, U.S. forces evaluated that there was “noticeable friction between the Koreans and the local Vietnamese,” then the Koreans “made a good impression on the VN public in areas where they have established their presence semi-permanently.”<sup>74</sup> In the same way, the CORDS’ study argued that the Koreans had an “unfortunate image” for a while after their arrival, but around 1967, owing to their efforts to eradicate “misconduct, wanton brutality, and willful criminality,” the brutal image was “being eroded very slowly.”<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile, the ROK Marine Brigade gained a somewhat more brutal image than the ROK Army divisions because of their conduct. The 9th Division, which took over ROK Marine Brigade’s TAOR, felt its fellow Korean soldiers’ brutal image. Maj. Tak Yong-ho, S-2 Chief in the 29th Regiment of the White Horse Division, testified, “There were about 2,000 people in the region of Lac An. Since ROK marines swept here before, most of the people were scared of us.”<sup>76</sup> The 2nd Battalion commander of the 28th Regiment, Lt. Col. Kim Ki-taek, said, “When we first came here, we felt the people looked us suspiciously. After learning Marines’ brutal activities here, we put more effort into the friendship with the people.”<sup>77</sup> S-2 Officer of the 3rd

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<sup>73</sup> Lee Man-jin interview, 25 September 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 197; Bae Guk-jong interview, 30 August 1967, *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum from the I Field Force to MACV, “Evaluation of ROK Forces,” 27 January 1966, Folder 15, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA. It said, “the friction stemmed from numerous causes among which were: lack of aggressive attitude of the part of the ROKs; jealousy on the part of the less well-equipped ARVN and RF/PF Forces in the area who felt themselves to be hard pressed by the VC; The misunderstandings which are bound to occur when the ROKs and Vietnamese communicate in a third language (English) and in which neither side is fluent; and lastly, the ever present “face” problem between the oriental races.”

<sup>75</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” 70, NARA II.

<sup>76</sup> Tak Yong-ho interview, 5 December 1978, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.2, 134.

<sup>77</sup> Kim Ki-taek interview, 23 November 1978, *Ibid.*, 52

Battalion, Capt. Kim Sang-ho, also stated, “The people, who had been scared of the Koreans forces because of the Marine Blue Dragon, changed their perception through our efforts.”<sup>78</sup>

Even after moving into the Marines’ TAOR of I CTZ during by early January 1968, the ROK marines’ brutal reputation for the pacification became an issue.

There have been at least three instance during the past two months when Korean patrols killed hostages in retaliation for receiving small arms fire from a hamlet. The most infamous of these occurred in the hamlet of PHONG NHI in Dien Ban District on 12 February 1968, where 79 women and children were killed. The Vietnamese peasants are, of course, deathly afraid of the Koreans. Many say that they prefer the VC to the Koreans.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, the CORDS’ report in April 1968 about the evaluation of pacification in Quang Nam province, claimed that the ROK Marines had a harmful impact on pacification. It suggested various reasons but the biggest one was that the ROKs implanted fear to the district farmers, claiming, “On one occasion after receiving sniper fire from a hamlet, the ROK forces virtually leveled the hamlet, killing in excess of 80 civilians, the majority of whom were women and children.”<sup>80</sup> Later in July 1968, the CORDS’ evaluation report kept criticizing the ROK Marines’ atrocities, the limited civic action, and their poor public image, suggesting, “while the political problems might be great, consideration should be given to the deployment of the brigade to an area of lesser pacification importance which requires defensive operations [such as DMZ area].”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Kim Sang-ho interview, 13 March 1981, *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>79</sup> From Province Senior Advisor to Deputy for CORDS/III MAF, “2nd ROK Marine Brigade,” 18 March 1968, Container 32, A1 681, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>80</sup> “Evaluation of Pacification in Hieu Nhon and Hoa Vang Districts, Quang Nam Province,” 1 April 1968, Box 7, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, 1967-1973, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>81</sup> Evaluation Report, “Pacification Progress in Quang Nam Province, I Corps Tactical Zone,” 27 July 1968, Box 12. CORDS Historical Working Group Files 1967-1973, RG 472, NARA II.

The ROK forces' alleged atrocities including massacre towards the civilians, resulted in shaping the brutal image of the ROK troops. Especially, ROK Marines, who did not necessarily follow the ROKFV headquarters direction, were allegedly involved in one of the most well-known Korean troops' Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat massacre.<sup>82</sup> Against their allegation, at that time and still, the ROK forces have denied any organized massacre, arguing that those incidents were committed by Vietcong who disguised as Koreans attempting to harm the ROK forces' reputation. In his letter to U.S. MACV on 4 June 1968, General Chae "expressed concern for Vietnamese lives," but denied the allegation, concluding that the "massacre was an act conspired and mercilessly elected by the Communists."<sup>83</sup> The U.S. forces were cautious about jumping to conclusions. For example, against the ROK's allegation, despite admitting that the ROK Marines were unsuitable for the pacification assignment, Deputy for CORDS, Charles Cross, told, "the Koreans are not as bad as everyone says they are."<sup>84</sup> Later, the U.S. MACV report wrote that the Korean forces "were the object of the enemy's most severe propaganda, ... citing alleged atrocities inflicted by ROK troops on the families of servicemen."<sup>85</sup> In late 1969, against the RAND Report accusing the Korean troops' atrocities against South Vietnamese civilians, the Joint Chiefs of Staff doubted the report's credibility: "Our review of the Rand Report reveals that

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<sup>82</sup> "2nd ROK Marine Brigade," NARA II. For more details see: Chŏnjinsŏng, *Pindinsŏngŭro kanŭn kil* [A Road to Binh Dinh] (Seoul: Ch'aeksesang, 2018); Lee Kyu-bong, *Mianhaeyo! pet'ŭnam* [I am sorry, Vietnam] (Seoul: p'urŭnyŏksa, 2011). In April 2018, two survivors from the Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat massacre visited South Korea and testified their experiences. "Han'gukkunŭi pet'ŭnam min'ganin haksal, Chega kŭ chŭnggŏimnida [I am the Evidence for the ROK Forces' Massacre]," *Seoul Shinmun*, 20 April 2018. [seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20180420500001](http://seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20180420500001)(accessed 3 January 2020).

<sup>83</sup> Memorandum from MACV Inspector General to the Chief of Staff, "Alleged Atrocity Committed by ROK Marines on 12 February 1968," 23 December 1969, Container 32, Reports of Investigations, 1968-1972, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>84</sup> Memorandum from Deputy for CORDS III MAF for PSA [Province Senior Advisor] Quang NAM, "Re Koreans," 28 March 1968, Container 32, A1 681, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>85</sup> Headquarters of U.S. MACV, *Command History, 1968*, vol.1, 151, Folder 1, Box 0, Bud Harton Collection, VNCA.

the allegations of ROK atrocities were made by a very small number of the total interviewed.<sup>86</sup> In fact, many sources, such as several U.S. RAND papers, accused ROK forces' massacre and atrocities during the Vietnam War, and one of them was known to the public in early 1970.<sup>87</sup> Against the U.S. newspaper's report of ROK Marines' massacre in the Phu Yen Province in 1966, ROK Ministry of Defense strongly denied it to a foreign press.<sup>88</sup> At this time, U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird neither confirm nor deny this, saying that the Korean troops' alleged atrocities were not the U.S. responsibility but the matter of Saigon and Seoul.<sup>89</sup>

Yet, whether ROK forces committed an organized massacre or not, based on the characteristics of the war where the guerrillas were among the people, to avoid killing civilians was not simple. In terms of this nature, by separating people from Vietcong was complicated. The 5th Company commander of the Tiger 1st Regiment, Capt. Park Dong-won, stated:

There might be innocent civilians (women, elders, and kids) among the Vietcong we killed. The enemy side could claim this is the massacre of the innocent people, but they were irregular forces based on the circumstances of their participation. The Vietnam War was typical guerilla warfare without having a battlefield and front line. ... Men and women of all ages could be Vietcong.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, the assistant chief of staff for intelligence (G-2) of the Tiger Division, Lt. Col. Lee Dae-sung, stated, "to sort the Vietcong was problematic. Since they attacked by mixed with people, the South Vietnamese authorities also recommended us to shoot them. It was very

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<sup>86</sup> Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, "Allegations on Korean Atrocities in South Vietnam," 15 December 1969, Folder 16, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>87</sup> James A. Thomson, *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), 189-191; "New Data Accuse Korean Soldiers," *New York Times*, 11 January 1970.

<sup>88</sup> "Wöllamhaksal chünggöopta [There is No Proof for the [Korean] Massacre in Vietnam]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 16 January 1970.

<sup>89</sup> Marjorie Hunter, "Laird Disclaims Koreans' Acts," *New York Times*, 12 January 1970.

<sup>90</sup> Park Dong-won interview, 29 January 1978, *Chüngönl t'onghae pon pet 'ünam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 253-254.

difficult to tell the Vietcong and the civilian. This [massacre issue] was complicated.”<sup>91</sup> Lt. Col. Moon Yong-il, Chief of the War History of the Tiger Division, strongly argued, “the characteristics of the Vietnam War showed that Viet Cong was equal to civilian and good people. ... In this dirty war, there couldn’t be a separation of civilian and good people.”<sup>92</sup> Overall, The 3rd Company commander of the Tiger 1st Regiment, Capt. Jang Chang Kyu argued, “I don’t see there was a merciless massacre. Yet, we can have civilian damage during the operation.”<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, even if the atrocities and massacres were marginal and exceptional in ROK’s conduct, those rumors were reproduced by VC and North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, and it unquestionably contributed to the ROK forces’ bad and brutal reputation.

The Vietnamese had a complex feeling on the Koreans. Here is the Vietnamese evaluator’s conclusion on their perception of the Korean soldier:

Because of the following reasons, most of the peoples in hamlets were afraid of Koreans when they first came to their areas. .... By their natural disposition, Koreans were severe. They were not as open minded as Americans. When they first came to an area which was strange to them, the Koreans always were on their guard and kept a harsh and doubtful attitude toward everyday, ... The people were afraid of them. Ill-mannered acts of some of them, like to outrage the women, and to kill them to destroy all evidence when their sexual appetite was satisfied, and to make arrests and to beat freely the people made them unpopular. ... But at present, the people’s fearful and pessimistic attitude of the first moment has disappeared. They are, on the contrary, grateful towards the Koreans who worked hard to protect their life and property. It can be said that at present the people living at areas where there are Koreans stationed are very happy and enthusiastic to be allowed to live in relatively secure areas to earn their living. They themselves have allowed that if one day the Koreans should be withdrawn, their villages and hamlets will sooner or later be controlled again by the enemy.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Lee Dae-sung interview, 30 October 1966, *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>92</sup> Moon Young-il interview, 13 August 1980, *Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>93</sup> Jang Chang-kyu interview, 19 December 2000, *Ibid.*, 578.

<sup>94</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” 77-78, NARA II.

The Vietnamese had both feelings of admiration and fear of the Koreans. The CORDS' evaluation of the ROK Army (ROKA)'s pacification in 1969 concluded that ROK's are achieving some positive results in terms of providing strong local security for hamlets. It wrote, "the villagers are not desirous of having the Koreans in their hamlets because of their lack of discrimination between the populace and the VC. However, the villagers do welcome the aggressive security shield provided by Korean troops in areas outside the hamlets."<sup>95</sup> One of the Vietnamese evaluators reported, "[In Lac Binh hamlet in Ninh Hoa District,] the people were very encouraged to see Koreans stationed in their hamlet to strike up a friendship with Vietnamese because they have too much suffered from acts of the VC."<sup>96</sup> He continued that the hamlet "was before very insecure, but after the arrival of Koreans, thanks to their effective support, the hamlet security situation is relatively much better."<sup>97</sup>

For instance, one U.S. province senior advisor in Tuy Hoa District of Phu Yen's memorandum showed the South Vietnamese's complicated feeling for the Korean forces in 1970. People in this district used have Koreans, and against the news that the Koreans would be back, "even with some bitter memories of the ROKs in earlier years, the population in the valley appears to want the Koreans back."<sup>98</sup> The Province Senior advisor James B. Engle concluded:

One of the dominant facts of recent times in Phy Yen has been "Koreanization." The Province Chief keeps pushing more of the security responsibility over on the Koreans. There is public support for this simply because the Koreans are so much more thorough and reliable than ARVN or territorial forces. The public has not forgotten the atrocity stories of the period from 1965 to 1968, but it is aware of

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<sup>95</sup> CORDS Evaluation Branch, "Evaluation of Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) Involvement in the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC) in Kanh Hoa, Binh Dinh, and Phu Yen Provinces, II CTZ," 1 January 1969. Box 12, CORDS Historical Working Group Files, 1967-1973, RG 472, NARA II.

<sup>96</sup> "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," 72-73, NARA II.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Province Senior Advisor to Senior Advisor – II CTZ, "Phu Yen Political Report No. 21: Comments on slanted ROK press stories and the public attitude in Phu Yen Province towards ROK forces," 25 April 1970, Box 296, A1 690, RG 472, NARA II.

improved conduct, and the Koreans are again welcomed (particularly if they undertake not to repeat atrocities) where they were once hated. The welcome however is cautious—the Koreans are feared because they are rough and do not tolerate nonsense—and there is still a preference for the Koreans soldiery to be away from the hamlets which, indeed most of them are.<sup>99</sup>

The main reason the local Vietnamese people wanted the Korean troops was that they had confidence in ROK's providing security, as the U.S. forces estimated that the Koreans' "record in providing security for the people of Phu Yen has been exceptional."<sup>100</sup> At the end of their participation in 1972, *The Washington Post* in 1972 described:

The result of their operations is an ambivalence among the South Vietnamese people. Many hate and fear the Koreans for what they have done in the past, but others admire them and want them to remain here because they provide sure protection against the Communists. Many people seem to feel a little bit bot.<sup>101</sup>

While South Vietnamese had complex feelings on the Koreans, they did not want the Korean troops to leave their village, as CORDS study wrote, "The people's main aspiration is to have the Koreans remaining indefinitely in their villages and hamlets until the day when the last VC is annihilated."<sup>102</sup> As a result, the ROK's pacification efforts, at least, worked in terms of providing security to the local people and made people need ROK forces.

Nonetheless, ROK's brutal image gave fewer credits to the argument that the Korean forces won the hearts and minds of the local people. This doubt is related to whether Koreans had a natural advantage for the pacification. There was a strong belief that the Koreans had the advantage as the same Asians with the Vietnamese in conducting COIN operations. Not only the

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> "The Fierce Koreans of Vietnam," *Washington Post*.

<sup>102</sup> "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," 77-78, NARA II.

U.S. newspapers but only the U.S. forces recognized that “dealing with fellow Asians, the Koreans were more effective.”<sup>103</sup> One U.S. official document wrote, “the ROK Forces have continued to apply their unique Asian approach to the methodical pacification of their areas of responsibility.”<sup>104</sup> In his interview with *U.S. News & World Report*, General Chae further explained on the Koreans’ advantage in pacification:

Frankly, we know that we are better combat politicians in this type of war than U.S. or other Allied forces, because we share many similarities with the Vietnamese. We don’t discriminate. We have many mutual social activities. My soldiers have an easier time of it becoming friend with the Vietnamese. And we exploit our similarities to the maximum.

We are Oriental. Our political circumstances and those of Vietnam are the same. My soldiers sincerely sympathize with the Vietnamese, as if they were their own people.<sup>105</sup>

ROK forces argued that their approach, based on understanding Vietnamese culture as the same Asian, was effective. General Chae further argued that the key deciding success or failure in civil-affairs operation was the attitude and manner in treating the civilians, emphasizing to give not material but a heart to the local people.<sup>106</sup>

Here is Maj. Rasmussen’s assessment on the Koreans’ pacification efforts:

The Koreans also emphasize civil affairs activities. The theme of their program is a sincere, genuine concern for the welfare of their fellow Asians. Extensive, high-cost programs are avoided. Activities such as feasts for village elders are often held in an effort to win their support. The Koreans, like the Vietnamese, have great respect for the elders of the villages and hamlets. Therefore, such endeavors are accepted as a natural part of everyday life.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> United States, Pacific Command, *Report on the War in Vietnam, as of 30 June 1968* (Washington DC: US Government Print Office, 1969, 142.

<sup>104</sup> Headquarters of U.S. MACV, *Command History, 1967*, vol.1, 382, Folder 1, Box 0, Bud Harton Collection, VNCA.

<sup>105</sup> “A Korean General Tells How to Beat the Viet Cong,” *U.S. News & World Report*, VNCA.

<sup>106</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 93.

<sup>107</sup> Rasmussen, “ROK Operations in Central Vietnam,” *Military Review*, 55.

ROK officers argued that their approach based on understanding Vietnamese culture as the same Asian was practical. General Chae argued that they knew what the Vietnamese needed because the Koreans also experienced the war. He ordered his troops to “play with an attitude, not with money. ... to respect elders, do not throw gums and chocolates to kids but open and give directly to them, and hug them.”<sup>108</sup> Capt. Kwon Joon-taek, the civil-affairs officer of the 3rd Battalion in the 1st Regiment, explained that they tried to comfort the people while promoting the Korean troops in the civic-action operation. He took pride in the fact that the Koreans had an oriental manner to serve and respect elders and take care of the people. For example, even when distributing food, while Americans just threw the food in the village, they distributed to the individual so that everyone could have the food.<sup>109</sup> Col. Han Min Seok argued the ROK and U.S. forces’ civil-affairs operation was fundamentally different in the attitude towards people. He delineated the Koreans’ had natural strength as the same Asians, arguing:

We do not intentionally so, but it is based on the historical background and custom. ... For example, Koreans ask to get one more corn covered with flies while Americans can’t. Americans can’t bow to the elders. We experienced the same thing in the past, so we know. We can show our heart that we came here to help you.<sup>110</sup>

Overall, the Koreans held the fellow Asian perception to be true, putting efforts to make the best use of it in their civil-affairs operations, and thus promoted it to the Vietnamese and other allied forces.

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<sup>108</sup> Chae Myung-shin interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 90.

<sup>109</sup> Kwon Joon-taek interview, 20 March 1976, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol. 1, 291.

<sup>110</sup> Han Min-sŏk interview, August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 126-127.

In contrast, the CORDS study in 1968 strongly denied fellow Asian perception and regarded it as a myth. This study once recognized, “Before the study, the field evaluator heard many generalizations about the performance of ROK forces ... showing that Asiatics understand and work better with Asiatics.”<sup>111</sup> Then, it concluded, “most of these generalizations proved to be ‘patent nonsense’.”<sup>112</sup> The U.S. evaluator who observed the Korean pacification delineated: “ROK Army regiments in II CTZ have demonstrated conclusively that Asiatics do not necessarily deal effectively with the pacification of other Asiatics simply by virtues of being Asiatics.”<sup>113</sup> Yet, the CORDS study made a hasty conclusion because its estimate was mainly based on opinions of district and hamlet chiefs, not of the ordinary people. Therefore, it is required to understand their relationship to understand the reality of the Koreans’ strengths as fellow Asians.

The Koreans’ views towards the Vietnamese were not limited as fellow Asians. First, despite the argument that they identified with Vietnamese people, the Koreans had a kind of sympathy for them. Many South Korean soldiers stated that they had compassion for the Vietnamese from the same experiences from the Korean War.<sup>114</sup> One Korean soldier said that he felt bad to see the Vietnamese because they reminded him of his family and himself when he was kid.<sup>115</sup> Most of the Korean soldiers experienced the catastrophe of a civil war, killing each other despite being from the same nation in the name of the different ideologies, losing families and home because of the war. Even after the war, they suffered from poverty, which became one of

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<sup>111</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” NARA II.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Charlotte Saikowski, “South Koreans View Viet Role with Pride,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 May 1967; Hwang Dök-chung, “Syup’ō ttaihan [Super Korean],” in *Tto tarūn shijak* [A New Start], ed. Federation of Artistic & Cultural Organization of Korea (Chuncheon: Kangwon Ilbosa, 2000), 109.

<sup>115</sup> Lee Chil-yong, “Pijōnt’uwōn [Noncombatant],” in Ibid., 135.

the main motivations for them to join the Vietnam War: to feed themselves and earn money to support their siblings in South Korea.<sup>116</sup>

At the same time, they had more sense of superiority than compassion towards the Vietnamese, and even that compassion often originated from their superiority. Sometimes the sense of compassion varied depending on the group, as CORDS study stated, “In handling civilians, they are firm and compassionate with women and small children, firm and brusque with the men and boys.”<sup>117</sup> At first, their sense of superiority sprung from their national pride as Koreans and disregard for the Vietnamese. The CORDS study assured, “ROK enlisted men feel simply superior to the Vietnamese.”<sup>118</sup> It described in more detail, “[Koreans were] cocky, prideful, not so boisterous or abrasive as the American, and seized by a feeling of superiority toward the Vietnamese adult male.”<sup>119</sup> Even the ROK officers’ view was similar, as the study described one case:

ROK Army officers consistently present a cordial friendly appearance to the Vietnamese whenever possible. Privately, to Americans they reveal an attitude toward the Vietnamese of patronizing indulgence. ... Once they had a social party with the members of Van Canh district staff, the ROK battalion commander said, “Yes, we must help these poor people.”<sup>120</sup>

Moreover, the Koreans embraced a kind of racism against the Vietnamese. Capt. Jang Chang-kyu, who had many experiences interacting with Vietnamese as a ROK instructor of the

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<sup>116</sup> Many of soldiers in their memoirs agree that this poverty issue was their motivation to join the Vietnam War. See: Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” 69, NARA II.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 78.

Vietnamese regional forces, and a student who stayed with a Vietnamese family for three months to learn the language, said:

We had many similarities in appearance and culture as the same Asian. Accordingly, they considered us as a friend. However, it was us who had a problem. We did not treat them as a friend. We had a sense of superiority treating them as an ‘uncivilized barbarian.’ I think the reason was based on our conception: their skin is darker than us, they are small, and smell bad.<sup>121</sup>

This sense of racism became the main reason for the scholars who argue that Koreans were sacrificed by American colonialism and were assailants of Vietnamese people.<sup>122</sup> According to these studies, soldiers’ motivation to join the Vietnam War was to realize their masculinity, and thus they looked down the Vietnamese from the first time.

This superiority inherently influenced the Koreans’ distrust of the Vietnamese. A ROK taekwondo instructor at Ninh Hoa, described: “The Vietnamese are no good. They lie. They cheat. They play cards all the time. They steal. They don’t want to fight. Everyone knows that.”<sup>123</sup> The CORDS’ study stated, “The Korean commanders do not trust most Vietnamese officials, and this distrust extends to the district chief level and often higher.”<sup>124</sup> In addition, the distrust of the Vietnamese stemmed from some other reasons. At first, the Koreans generally regarded that South Vietnamese had loyalty to North Vietnam or VC over their own government,

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<sup>121</sup> Jang Chang-kyu interview, 19 December 2000, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 577-578.

<sup>122</sup> Based on Korean literatures, Jin-im Park argues that Korean soldiers were experiencing identity confusion between the colonizer and the colonized sitting on the sidelines in America’s Vietnam War. Jin-im Park, “The Colonized Colonizers: Korean Experiences of the Vietnam War,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 7, no. 3/4 (1998): 217-240. Charles K. Armstrong follows this argument, arguing that the Korean behavior can be explained by the difficult interstitial position of Koreans in a war with racial divides. Armstrong, “America’s Korea, Korea’s Vietnam.” Also, Jin-kyoung Lee estimates that South Korean troops were a surrogate military of the imperial U.S. Jin-kyoung Lee, “Surrogate Military, Subimperialism, and Masculinity: South Korea in the Vietnam War, 1965-73,” *Positions: East Asia cultures critique* 17, no. 3 (2009): 655-682.

<sup>123</sup> “Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone,” 78, NARA II.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

and thus regarded them as pathetic people based on South Koreans' staunch anti-communism. This stemmed from their experience of the Korean War, education, and social atmosphere of South Korea. Second, they did not trust the Vietnamese based on their experience working with them, where information offered to South Vietnamese often leaked to the VC.<sup>125</sup> The U.S. district advisor in Phu Yen gave a meaningful assessment:

The ROK's are more open and frank with me than with the district chief. I know this from having discussions at the ROK CP with and without my counterpart being present. This difference in their approach is probably due to about three reasons. First, the Koreans all feel superior to the Vietnamese. That's obvious every day of the week. Second, there is the history of past relationship in working with the US military in Korea. And third, they just don't trust Vietnamese, and for good reason. There hasn't been a National Police operation in this district since I've been here which hasn't been tipped off in advance. The Koreans know that. My relations with the Koreans are good, except that they don't care all about coordinating civic action.<sup>126</sup>

The Koreans were "considerably more forthright and candid about operational plans and intelligence reports with US advisors than with the Vietnamese."<sup>127</sup> Also, they were often uncooperative with the South Vietnamese authorities, not only for combat but also for civil-affairs operations:

The ROK propensity for uncoordinated unilateral action is markedly apparent in civic action. Battalion and regimental S5 officers seldom staff any long-range or overall programs to the appropriate district chief for his assent or even comment. Separate project proposals are submitted to the district chief for his approval only if the Koreans think it is necessary, or if his support is believed essential for a successful initial launching.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> For more details see Chapter 8.

<sup>126</sup> "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," 6-7, NARA II.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 41.

As a result, distrust of the Vietnamese led the Korean forces to conduct a unilateral action.

The Korean forces' unilateral action and attitude revealed serious problems in their pacification efforts. The Vietnamese showed displeasure and grievances against the Koreans' attitude. The U.S. recognized the two forces' relationship as follows:

Most Korean officers frankly admit that they do not trust the Vietnamese. Many incidents have been reported where the Koreans refuse to pass plans of an impending ROKFV/ROKNAF combined operation to the American advisor until he promises not to tell his Vietnamese counterpart. The Koreans hold the RVNAF's fighting ability in contempt and their attitude is known by the Vietnamese. ARVN commanders bitterly complain that everything the Koreans do is geared to increase ROK stature even at the expense of the Vietnamese.<sup>129</sup>

The CORDS' study explained that the Vietnamese did not necessarily like the Korean civil-affairs operation because it was unilateral. For example, "the district chief learned about the project after the construction had started on village-owned public land which he had reserved for some other use. He was very unhappy for a while."<sup>130</sup> The Vietnamese district chief of Tuy An discussed the Koreans, "Their civic action is good, but everything is Korean-Korean-Korean!" He continued, "The Koreans never listen to me. They won't take any suggestions from anyone. All they want to do is have a ceremony. They have too many ceremony."<sup>131</sup> Distrust of Vietnamese and lack of cooperation potentially prevented the Koreans to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

Their deficiency in the relationship with the Vietnamese restricted the ROK forces' pacification efforts. First, and foremost, this became an obvious limitation for ROK forces'

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<sup>129</sup> "Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROKFV)," NARA II.

<sup>130</sup> "Evaluation Report, ROK Army Influence upon CORDS-Supported Pacification Programs, II Corps Tactical Zone," 42, NARA II.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. This document also describes, "Commanders of the ROK regiments like to ceremonialize the nontactical contacts between their units and the Vietnamese people. This is particularly apparent in civic action."

pacification strategy of “spreading spoiling oil.” Based on their policy and strategy, ROK’s pacification area should not be restricted or limited. Rather, ROK forces should move to another area to pacify after handing over the area to the South Vietnamese authorities.<sup>132</sup> Thus, without cooperation with the South Vietnamese, this concept would not be realized. Even though the Koreans’ system provided security to the local people in their assigned region, without the South Vietnamese’ support, they could not expand the area to reach the same level of pacification achieved under the firm control by the South Vietnamese authorities. As a result, their achievement of providing security to the people in the limited area was not sufficient to the pacification: defeat the insurgency, control of people, and firm establishment of governmental authority in South Vietnam.

Second, the lack of cooperation would undermine their system: the operational concept of “hold-separate-destroy.” The ROK forces did not trust the South Vietnamese regional forces, who took charge of the security of the region.<sup>133</sup> Even though ROKFV put efforts to build and train the South Vietnamese regional forces, this training mission was not the ROK forces’ priority. Some ROK officers underestimated them as having a “lack of aggressive and had admiration towards Ho Chi Min.”<sup>134</sup> However, considering that the system needs Vietnamese cooperation to separate the Vietcong from the people, lack of cooperation with South Vietnamese forces reduced the effectiveness of their system of hold and separation of VC from local people.

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<sup>132</sup> The basic policy for the ROK forces’ pacification efforts was “to pacify the region by occupying the assigned area long time and then to move another area after turning over to the South Vietnamese forces.” Choi Dae-myöng interview, 3 September 1968, *Chüngönnül t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 134.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Jang Chang-kyu interview, 19 December 2000, *Chüngönnül t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 576.

Later in January 1970, Murrey Marder commented in the *Washington Post*:

South Korean troops in the past often have been cited by U.S. officials and other allies as “model of effectiveness” in “pacifying” areas under their control. Recent reports, however, allege that the success is achieved by “terrifying everyone,” Vietcong and non-Vietcong alike.<sup>135</sup>

After 1969, when pacification became the priority of the allied forces’ efforts in the Vietnam War, the Korean methods were not regarded as unique and distinctive anymore. Moreover, after Vietnamization started, the Koreans’ weakness became evident. The Koreans had another conflict with the Vietnamese authorities because of their refusals to take over the extra burden, stemmed from the U.S. forces’ withdrawal during the Vietnamization period. Also, the ROK forces’ position became ambiguous, since the Vietnamization policy mostly required the South Vietnamese authority’s active role for conducting the war. The cooperation would be more necessary than ever. However, during this period, ROK forces became more passive and defensive, and their pacification efforts became less vigorous than before. The morale and discipline of the Korean soldiers, who were waiting for the end of the war without the hope for victory, were deteriorated. Their brutal image, in addition to the frequent illicit activities, isolated them more from the South Vietnamese.

Overall, ROK’s pacification efforts worked only at a limited level. In fact, the Koreans’ war efforts on the Vietnam war were limited from the beginning. Based on their own interest, the Koreans tried to take a balance between the pretext and benefits. Conducting in Vietnam was not an end but means for South Korea to achieve its interest. Even in the pacification efforts, it was enough for the Koreans that at least they were providing security to the people. They understood

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<sup>135</sup> Murrey Marder, “S. Koreans Linked to Viet Terror,” *Washington Post*, 11 January 1970.

that the military methods were just one of the ways of pacification; and thus beyond ROK's capabilities, this would become the mission of South Vietnamese authorities.<sup>136</sup> By focusing on mainly the military means, their pacification was as well the limited efforts from the beginning. Therefore, the Koreans, internally, were not necessarily eager to understand Vietnam. In fact, Korean soldiers came to Vietnam based on the national call, self-realization, economic benefits, etc.; not to help Vietnamese. Their understanding of Vietnam was superficial: the education about Vietnam in the training camp was short and shallow. Their belief of having the advantage in the pacification as the same ethnicity with the Vietnamese, rather made them not to accept the differences of the Vietnamese and justified their unilateral approach towards them. They satisfied that the Koreans had done properly and at least better than Americans. At the same time, the Koreans forced their way to the Vietnamese based on their sense of superiority and distrust. As a result, the cultural kinship with the Vietnamese was an illusion.

The Koreans would never be the Vietnamese. It was difficult for them to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese population, under the situation of even South Vietnamese forces arguably did not achieve the loyalty of their own people. Yet, it was due to its system, not to the cultural understanding of Vietnam, the South Koreans' pacification efforts at least secured the area and provided security to the local population. As a result, their pacification efforts in the Vietnam War was a half success.

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<sup>136</sup> Han Min-sök interview, August 1969, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 126.

## Chapter 6

### “War as a Lost Cause:” The Deterioration of South Korea’s Motivation for the Vietnam War

#### “Tet Offensive” in Korea and Its Impact

In January 1968, a series of shocking events in January occurred on the Korean peninsula and in Vietnam. On 21 January, thirty-one North Korean commandos raided the Blue House, the official presidential residence in Seoul, attempting to assassinate South Korean president Park Chung-hee.<sup>1</sup> The North’s attempt to kill the president of the South failed when they engaged in combat with South Korean police troops two kilometers from the Blue House. A total of twenty-nine North Korean troops were killed, one withdrew, and one was arrested; the South had eighty-four casualties. Two days later, on 23 January, North Korea captured the U.S. Navy ship *Pueblo* along the eastern coast of the peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Among the 83 U.S. crew members, three were killed during the engagement and eighty were imprisoned. A week after the *Pueblo* incident, on 30 January, North Vietnam and the Vietcong launched an all-out offensive in South Vietnam. It was the Tet Offensive.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Daniel P. Bolger, *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low-Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966-1969*, Leavenworth Papers No. 19 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1991); Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, “The Quiet War: Combat Operations Along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, 1966-1969,” *Journal of Military History* 64, no. 2 (2000): 439-458.

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see Daniel V. Gallery, *The Pueblo Incident* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970); Mitchell B. Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Richard A. Mobley, *Flash Point North Korea: The Pueblo and EC-121 Crises* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003); Mitchell B. Lerner, “A Dangerous Miscalculation: New Evidence from Communist-Bloc Archives about North Korea and the Crisis of 1968,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no.1 (2004): 3-21; Kim Jungbae, “Puk’an miguk, kūrigo naengjōn ch’eje: 1968 nyōn p’uebūrho sagōnūl chungshimūro [Rethinking the *Pueblo* Incident in the Cold War], *The Korean Journal of American History* 27 (May 2008): 115-144; Jack Cheevers, *Act of War: Lyndon Johnson, North Korea, and the Capture of the Spy Ship Pueblo* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2013).

Before the Tet Offensive, approximately 50,000 Korean troops with two army divisions and one Marine brigade were in Vietnam. Two ROKA divisions were deployed in the II Corps tactical zone (CTZ) of the Central Highlands, and the Marine brigade was in I CTZ in the area south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). During the Tet Offensive, Korean forces in Vietnam were not involved in a fierce fight except for the Marine Brigade whose territory was one of North Vietnam's key targets of the offensive.<sup>3</sup> The ROK Marines started Operation Dinosaur to respond to the enemy offensive: "The 2d Brigade, ROKMC with three battalions (1st, 2nd, and 5th Battalions) [had already] commenced search and destroy operations within their TAOR (Tactical Area of Responsibility)."<sup>4</sup> This operation to relieve Hoi An city was a combined operation in which the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment and one company from the U.S. 1st Marine Division participated.<sup>5</sup> In his briefing on 1 February, General William Westmoreland, the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) commander, said that "South of Danang at Hoi An there has been considerable action in order to root out the enemy that infiltrated that area. The Republic of Korea Marines have performed well in that area."<sup>6</sup> Most of the area around Hoi An was stabilized by 3 February.<sup>7</sup>

After the ROK Marine Brigade's clearing operation, the ROK Marine 3rd Battalion started the recapturing of Hoi An on 5 February. They were reinforced with one ARVN company

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Shulimson, Lieutenant Colonel Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith, and Captain David A. Dawson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps History and Museums Division, 1997), 142.

<sup>4</sup> "Operation Dinosaur (ROKMC) [OP FILE]," 29 January 1968, US Marine Corps History Division Vietnam War Documents Collection, Folder 64, VNCA.

<sup>5</sup> Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 149.

<sup>6</sup> "Westmoreland Briefing on Tet Offensive-February 1, 1968," 1 February 1968, Douglas Pike Collection, Box 11, Folder 1, VNCA.

<sup>7</sup> Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol. 4 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1972), 333.

and one U.S. Marine tank platoon.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Marine Corps also reported that South Korean Marines supported the South Vietnamese “already-rolling offensive” in Hoi An, and that operation required urban combat to enter the city.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. Marine Corps described its progress: “entering the city, one of the [U.S.] Marine tanks was struck and set afire by an NVA B-40 anti-tank rocket. ... The burned vehicle was withdrawn and the remaining two tanks moved into the city to direct their fire on enemy bunkers and reinforced positions.”<sup>10</sup> Lt. Col. Choi Chil-ho, the 3rd Battalion commander, later testified that his troops followed the American tanks that had been significantly damaged by enemy fire. The U.S. Marine captain complained about the risk to the American tanks, yet Choi had no other option but to place American tanks at the head of the infantry soldiers.<sup>11</sup> It was a tough fight. On 6 February, the Marines only advanced 500 meters in three hours. The enemy was well covered by the wall of Hoi An’s City Hall, and the Koreans decided to abort the night operation. The next morning, the 3rd Battalion resumed the attack on city hall and the battle was over at 10:00 a.m.<sup>12</sup> After two days of urban combat, the Korean Marines retook Hoi An.

Korean Marines suffered approximately eighty casualties during the Tet Offensive.<sup>13</sup> While the U.S. media coverage of the same North Vietnam offensive shocked the American public and significantly contributed to the loss of support for the war, South Korean media reports calmly covered the Tet Offensive. First, the media reported Korean troops’ engagement

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<sup>8</sup> “United States Marine Corps Information Release: Hoi An,” 4 February 1968, Box 03, Folder 4, Glenn Helm Collection, VNCA.

<sup>9</sup> “United States Marine Corps Information Release: Hoi An,” VNCA.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Choi Chil-ho interview, 15 November 1984, Kukpangbu Kunsap’yŏnch’anyŏn’guso [The Institute for Military History], *Chüngŏnül t’onghae pon pet’ünam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun* [The Vietnam War and the ROK forces through testimony], vol. 3 (Seoul: Kukpangbu Kunsap’yŏnch’anyŏn’guso, 2003), 445.

<sup>12</sup> Choi Chil-ho, “Pet’ünam chŏnjaeng hoianshi chŏnt’u kyohun [The Lesson of the Battle of Hoi an in the Vietnam War],” *Kunsa* [Military History] 47 (2002), 101-102.

<sup>13</sup> Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 163.

and accomplishments during the Tet, arguing that the Tet Offensive did not negatively impact South Korean forces and that they achieved victory against the communists. For example, on 31 January, the *Donga Ilbo* reported that South Korean forces started a counterattack against the Tet Offensive and killed fifty-five enemy forces while sustaining only four injuries.<sup>14</sup> Later on 3 February, the same newspaper reported that the Korean killed 273 of the enemy troops with minimum casualties.<sup>15</sup> Regarding ROK Marine operations, multiple Korean media outlets reported that Korean Marines achieved an enormous victory by killing 620 enemies between 30 January and 2 March.<sup>16</sup>

South Korean media also reported on and analyzed North Vietnamese's intention and the U.S. response in the Tet Offensive. By focusing on the Battle of Khe San, the *Kyunghyang Sinmun* argued that the Tet indicated a change in North Vietnamese conduct of the war, moving from guerrilla warfare to conventional large-scale warfare.<sup>17</sup> In addition to this report, the *Donga Ilbo* argued that the North Vietnamese took a chance and assumed there would be an insufficient number of U.S. forces and predicted that the U.S. would continue to struggle after the Tet Offensive because their lack of forces.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, South Korean media were not able to broadcast the visual impact of the battle like their U.S. counterparts. The majority of Koreans received news from Vietnam mainly via newspaper and radio as only about 2.1 percent of Korean families had televisions at that time.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the mass media coverage of the Tet

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<sup>14</sup> "Han'gukkun negosesö pan'gyök [Korean Forces' Counterattack in Four Ways]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 31 January 1968.

<sup>15</sup> "Amhaengösa chakchön chuhyo [Operation Amhaengeosa was successful]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 3 February 1968.

<sup>16</sup> "Ch'öngnyong pudae p'isüp [The Blue Dragon Received an Assault]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 7 March 1968.

<sup>17</sup> "Shimgak'an pukpuhyönhwang, k'esan hyölchön [A Bloody Battle, The Battle of Khe San]," *Kyunghyang Sinmun*, 31 January 1968.

<sup>18</sup> "Höjöm norin chölllyak kongse [An Offensive Based on Targeting the Enemy Weakness]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 1 February 1968.

<sup>19</sup> South Korea had about 220,000 televisions in 1969 and the penetration rate was 3.9 percent. They had about 110,000 in 1968, thus the rate can be calculated about percent in 1968. Kim Young-hee et al., *Han'guk t'ellobijyön pangsong 50 nyön* [The 50 Years History of the Korean Television Broadcast] (Seoul: Communication Books, 2011), 2.

Offensive shocked people in the U.S. and began turning Americans against the Vietnam War, while the same event was not that shocking to South Koreans.

It was not the Tet Offensive, but the North Korean “Tet Offensive” that shocked South Korean public. The Blue House raid was a staggering blow to South Koreans. The South Korean government and mass media called this incident a “Seoul invasion.” The successive incident on 23 January—the seizure of the U.S. Navy ship *Pueblo*—convinced South Koreans that North Korea was preparing for a large-scale offensive. The day after the *Pueblo* incident, President Park warned the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, William J. Porter that “retaliation will become inevitable if there are any more attacks by the North on South Korea.”<sup>20</sup> Park also suggested a joint U.S.-South Korean assault that would first bomb the North Korean airfields and then attack the east coast. Two days later, he ordered the ROK 1st Army into full combat status reflecting the opinion of hardliners, especially ROKA generals, insisting to take “punitive action to teach Kim Il-Sung.”<sup>21</sup> On 2 February, in the meeting with Ambassador Porter, President Park again mentioned, “If ROKG does not guarantee that NKs will desist from their aggressive activities, and there is another incident, ROKG will take retaliatory measures.”<sup>22</sup>

The *Pueblo* incident shocked Americans as well as Koreans. U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson later wrote, “If I had to pick a date that symbolized the turmoil we experienced throughout 1968, I think January 23 would be the day—the morning the USS *Pueblo* was seized.”<sup>23</sup> The U.S. immediately dispatched the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* and called hundreds of

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<sup>20</sup> “Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State,” 24 January 1968, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964-1968, vol. 29, Part 1, Korea, eds. Karen L. Gatz (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), Document 145.

<sup>21</sup> “Telegram from the Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command and of United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler).” 27 January 1968, FRUS, Document 148.

<sup>22</sup> “Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State,” 3 February 1968, FRUS, Document 150.

<sup>23</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 532.

bombers, fighters, and support aircraft to the peninsula without prior consultation with South Korea.<sup>24</sup> Although Washington considered military options against North Korea, they eventually decided to solve the *Pueblo* incident by talking with Pyongyang.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Washington understood the incident as an act of North Korean support of North Vietnam: “to hinder the movement of [South] Koreans to South Vietnam, and to harass the U.S. in its conduct of the war in Vietnam.”<sup>26</sup> After witnessing the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, Washington became convinced of this assumption and President Johnson admitted that “I think without exception, believe there is a definite connection.”<sup>27</sup> Johnson explained to Park, “[North Korea] may hope, thereby to their friends in Hanoi. They may think that by raising tension in Korea they can force us to divert our attention from the campaign of aggression against South Viet-Nam.”<sup>28</sup> Since the primary concern of the U.S. was the Vietnam War, they did not want the North’s provocation to cause another war on the Korean peninsula.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Washington had to restrain Seoul.

After South Korea’s entrance in the Vietnam War in 1965, North Korea intensified the provocation began in 1966 and the clashes between the two sides frequently continued.<sup>30</sup> On 26 March and 20 May 1965, the North Korean government proclaimed their maximum support of North Vietnam’s “anti-America war,” and denounced South Korea’s participation.<sup>31</sup> In the middle of 1966, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung again affirmed North Korea’s support of North

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<sup>24</sup> Mobley, *Flash Point North Korea*, 68-69.

<sup>25</sup> “Notes of Meeting,” 23 January 1968, FRUS, Document 213. For more detail, see Mobley, *Flash Point North Korea*, 59-63.

<sup>26</sup> “Summary Minutes of Meeting,” 24 January 1968, FRUS, Document 217.

<sup>27</sup> Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident*, 100; “Transcript of the President’s News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters,” *New York Times*, 3 February 1968.

<sup>28</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, 4 February 1968, FRUS, Document 151.

<sup>29</sup> Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident*, 129; Sarantakes, “The Quiet War: Combat Operations Along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, 1966-1969,” 452.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 439-441. Mobley, “Flash Point North Korea: The *Pueblo* and EC-121 Crises,” 14.

<sup>31</sup> “Chŏngbusŏngmyŏng [Government Statement],” 26 March 1965, in Puk’an yŏn’gu charyojip [The Collection of the Research on North Korea], vol. 6, ed. Kim Jun-yŏp (Asiatic Research Institute of Korea University, 2010), 690-693; “Ch’oego inmin hoeüi che 3ki che 4ch’a hoeüi [The 4th Session of 3th Supreme People’s Assembly of North Korea],” in *Ibid.*, 694-697.

Vietnam in his speech at the representatives' meeting of the North Korean Communist Party.<sup>32</sup> Military provocations against South Korea were therefore an act of support for North Vietnam, and the conflict between the South and North reached a climax in 1968.

South Korea had a different view of the two North Korean provocations from Washington. Park kept insisting on military retaliation against North Korea even after receiving a soothing letter from Johnson. Park wrote:

I sincerely hope that you understand my conviction that the problems should be solved by all means before the public opinions of the world which have stood with us may cool down. It has been fifteen years since the Armistice Agreement was concluded and during this span of time, the North Koreans have constantly threatened us, their violation of the Agreement totaling some 5,000 cases. The threat has become even more serious during the past sixteen months, culminating in the aggressive intrusion into Seoul on January 21. I should mention that in dealing with the Communists, indefinite efforts for peaceful solution will only bring advantages to them rather than to us. I can say through our own experiences that the Communists should be taught a lesson that any aggressive action cannot escape due punitive action. If we had taken any punitive action whenever the north Koreans violated the Armistice Agreement in the past, we could have forestalled the situation which has ensued on these breaches. In other words, I think the situation which we are facing today has resulted from our inaction to meet effectively the violation of the Agreement by the north Koreans. To the north Koreans, therefore, we should show our resolute stand and determination that they cannot commit an aggressive act free of punishment. It should be remembered this alone will provide a corrective measure for the habitual aggressiveness of the north Koreans.<sup>33</sup>

The ROK government regarded these two shocking North Korean military provocations as the opening act of the North's invasion of the South. Fostering the fear that the North might invade the South soon, one article in the *Donga Ilbo* analyzed the Tet Offensive in light of Communists' general despicableness, referring to the North's provocations when arguing, "the truce with

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<sup>32</sup> "Hyŏn chŏngsewa uridangŭi kwaŏp [The Current Situation and our Party's Assignment]," Oct. 5, 1966, Ibid., vol. 7, 99-101.

<sup>33</sup> "Letter from President Park to President Johnson," 5 February 1968, FRUS, Document 155.

communists is always risky and hard to believe. The Tet Offensive again proved it to us.”<sup>34</sup> For South Koreans, the impact of the Tet Offensive was secondary to the North Korean military provocations. This article further urged South Koreans to be on alert against North Korea’s potential attack, which could occur anytime on the Korean peninsula.<sup>35</sup> As a result, South Koreans thought that a strong military retaliation would be key to terminating the continuing clashes.

The two countries’ different points of view surrounding North Korea’s military provocations caused a rift in U.S.-ROK relations. Seoul and the South Korean military were upset to see that the U.S. actively responded to the *Pueblo* incident while ignoring the Blue House raid.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, South Korean’s exclusion from the U.S.’s negotiation with Pyongyang and America’s lukewarm attitude toward the retaliation angered Seoul. Public opinion was more emotionally charged than the government’s and a nation-wide street demonstration took place daily in South Korea. South Koreans sought retaliation for the North Korean provocations and expressed disappointment and anger against the U.S. media’s manipulation of public opinion. When the actual secret meeting between the U.S. and North Korea at Panmunjom was held on 2 February, the *Donga Ilbo* reported the following: “We repeat the warning that Korean people’s distrust of the U.S. will be undeniable if the U.S. keeps settling a situation by repatriation of the *Pueblo* and the crew without decisive action against the Blue House raid.”<sup>37</sup> On 6 February, the *Donga Ilbo* attacked the “humiliating appeasement posture,” of the U.S. by describing them as a

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<sup>34</sup> “P’agidoen wöllamgujöng hyujön [The Broken Truce on New Year’s Day in Vietnam],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 31 January 1968.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “Telegram from the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, and Commander of United States, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp),” 23 January 1968, FRUS, Document 214.

<sup>37</sup> “Migugūi kyöryöghan t’aedorül ch’okkuhanda [We are Calling on the U.S. to Have a Determined Attitude],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 5 February 1968.

“paper tiger.”<sup>38</sup> They also argued that South Korea should consider either taking over the operational control of ROK forces in Korea from the U.S. command or withdrawing forces from Vietnam if the U.S. continued to ignore South Korean’s request to retaliate North Korea. On 8 February, students from Seoul National University urged the U.S. to stop conducting secret meetings with North Korea while arguing for South Korean withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> This was the first time that South Koreans raised the issue of disengagement from the Vietnam War.

The relationship between South Korea and the U.S. was severely strained by this point. Watching South Koreans’ fury, Washington was concerned that South Korea might take retaliatory action against North Korea or withdraw its troops from South Vietnam. Washington did not want the Korean conflict to have adverse effects on their initiatives in the Vietnam War. President Johnson sent the Secretary of the Army, Cyrus Vance to persuade and placate Seoul.<sup>40</sup> According to his memorandum to Johnson, Vance explained Seoul’s situation in his meeting with President Park and the key members of the ROK government on 12 and 13 February. According to Vance, President Park was in a highly emotional state, considering “the United States [was] partially to blame for the Blue House raid since the North Korean strike team had infiltrated across the DMZ in an area defended by U.S. forces.”<sup>41</sup> Park “objected to the bilateral discussions at Panmunjom between U.S. and North Korean representatives since he considered

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<sup>38</sup> “Migugūi wishin'gwa han'gugūi kago [The Dignity of the U.S. and the Resolution of South Korea],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 6 February 1968.

<sup>39</sup> “P'anmunjōm hoedam chōngji [Abandonment of Talk with North Korea at Panmunjom],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 8 February 1968.

<sup>40</sup> Vance explained the objective of his mission: “(1) the ROKG (Republic of Korea Government) will take no independent military actions against North Korea; (2) the ROKG will dampen down public agitation for retaliatory actions; and (3) the ROKG will consent to our private bilateral discussions with the North Koreans of the *Pueblo* issue in order that the crew and ship will be promptly released.” “Memorandum from Cyrus R. Vance to President Johnson,” 20 February 1968, FRUS, Document 181.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

them demeaning to the U.S. and therefore to the ROKG,” because he thought that the discussions infringed on ROK sovereignty.<sup>42</sup>

After his visit to Seoul, Vance evaluated his mission as having had limited success in curtailing Seoul’s retaliation for the Blue House raid. Instead of sticking to retaliation, Seoul insisted to sending an ultimatum to the North with the threat of retaliation if they again provoked the South. Vance refused to give assurances that the U.S. would back Seoul in the event of an attack against the North.<sup>43</sup> Although they disagreed, the two countries had a symbiotic relationship. South Korea needed U.S. aid and support for their national security so the dispute with the U.S. over North Korea was counter-balanced by the premise that the U.S. would maintain their alliance with South Korea. Some South Koreans were emotional about a lack of retaliation, but Seoul knew taking military action against North Korea without U.S. support would be impossible. Thus, after confirming that the U.S. was “not going to be dragged into war precipitated by unilateral ROK retaliation,” Seoul requested the U.S. assurance to deter North Korea.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Washington needed Seoul to refrain from military offences against the North and the retainment of South Korean combat troops in Vietnam was indispensable for their conduct of the Vietnam War. As a result, South Korea’s anger with the U.S., intended or not, became a bargaining chip in its negotiations with Washington.

As described in early chapters, Seoul kept bargaining with Washington to gain maximum benefits in return for dispatching their troops to Vietnam. Seoul complied with Washington’s continuing demand to send more combat troops to South Vietnam after September 1967. Seoul decided to send additional troops as a response to the U.S. but aimed to gain

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> “Telegram from the Commander of United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp),” 29 February 1968, FRUS, Document 183.

maximum benefits and minimize the backlash of public opinion against their escalation. In a meeting with U.S. Vice President Hubert Humphrey in Saigon at the end of October, ROK Prime Minister Chung Il-kwon requested the U.S. fulfil their promise in the Brown Memorandum to give economic and military aid to South Korea. He responded to Humphrey's suggestion of sending additional troops to Vietnam by pointing out, "as of this date only 30 percent of the total commitment [of promised economic and military aid] has been fulfilled." In addition to economic aid, Chung wanted to obtain equipment and modern weapons—including M16 rifles—to arm ROKA.<sup>45</sup> Ambassador Porter reported to Washington in November that it was hard to pressure Seoul to take action since Seoul would continue to demand more in exchange for additional troops. Porter suggested South Korea regarded the participation as their "'Aladdin's Lamp' to make all their dreams come true."<sup>46</sup> Still, he thought that "a brigade rather than a division size of additional troops could be obtained from Korea although Seoul would have domestic problems in additional troop dispatch."<sup>47</sup> Since Washington wanted more troops from South Korea, they responded that "highest levels now wish to pursue additional ROK troop" and prepare "what kind of 'package' ROK might ask in return."<sup>48</sup>

On 21 December 1967, in the meeting with Johnson at Canberra, Park indicated his willingness to send a light division by March 1968 in exchange for additional military and financial assistance from the U.S.<sup>49</sup> Seoul's plan was to make up the light division of 11,000 people total by sending 6,000 combat troops and 5,000 civilians to replace an equal number of

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<sup>45</sup> "Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State," 31 October 1967, FRUS, Document 131.

<sup>46</sup> "Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State," 25 November 1967, FRUS, Document 134.

<sup>47</sup> Memorandum for the President, "Status of Additional Korean Forces for Viet-Nam," 28 November 1967, Folder 24, Box 2, Veteran Members of the 109th Quartermaster Company (Air Delivery) Collection, VNCA.

<sup>48</sup> "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea," 30 November 1967, FRUS, Document 136.

<sup>49</sup> "Summary of Conversations Between President Johnson and President Pak," 17 April 1968, FRUS, Document 194.

support troops who were presently in Vietnam.<sup>50</sup> South Korea intended to reap the benefits and offset the negative view of the additional dispatch by adding civilians to the group they were dispatching. However, when media broadcast the news, Seoul claimed they knew nothing about it since they were cautious about public opinion prior to an official announcement of the escalation plan.<sup>51</sup>

However, the “Tet” in Korea and the resulting friction between the U.S. and South Korea halted the process of dispatching additional ROK troops to Vietnam and “had to be viewed from an entirely new perspective.”<sup>52</sup> Seoul finally agreed to relinquish the consideration of retaliation and promised not to recall their troops from Vietnam in exchange for additional U.S. military assistance and economic aid. As a CIA report explained, “tension resulting from the capture of the *Pueblo* and the North Korean raid on the presidential palace is gradually easing,” and the two countries’ relationship seemed to return to normal.<sup>53</sup> After the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, Washington considered escalating the war when General Westmoreland requested 200,000 more troops to regain the initiative. Then ROK Prime Minister Chung secretly contacted Ambassador Porter to suggest dispatching a large number of troops—two army divisions and the two-regiment light division to Vietnam—which was striking since adding these numbers would bring Korean troops to a total of 100,000 in South Vietnam. In exchange for the additional troops, Seoul demanded the following from the U.S.:

(A) Provide necessary financial assistance to permit ROK to place its three ready reserve divisions, which are now fully equipped, on active duty.

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<sup>50</sup> “Information Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson,” 19 June 1968, FRUS, Document 202.

<sup>51</sup> “Wöllamjüngp'a öpta [There would be no additional troops to Vietnam],” *Kyunggyang Shinmun*, 5 January 1968.

<sup>52</sup> “Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State,” 15 March 1968, FRUS, Document 188.

<sup>53</sup> CIA Report, “Weekly Summary, Korea,” 8 March 1968, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Collection, Central Intelligence Agency Library.

(B) U.S. should then bring the seven ROK rear area security reserve divisions up to the equipment levels of regular ready reserve divisions. This could be done at an equipment cost of about nine million dollars for each division.

(C) U.S., with reversion of Okinawa in mind, should construct a large air base on Cheju-do for use by such sophisticated aircraft as the F-4.<sup>54</sup>

Seoul was willing to send an additional large number of troops for maximum national security, since they strongly needed to reinforce and modernize their troops after experiencing a national security crisis. Despite the need for more Korean troops in South Vietnam, Washington did not accept the offer, mainly because of the extensive expense for the U.S. At the end of March, Johnson made the decision not to escalate the Vietnam War in conjunction with giving up his bid for presidential candidacy.

Meanwhile, the South Korean public opinion was against deploying additional troops to South Vietnam. The opposition party sided with public and took a firm position against the dispatch.<sup>55</sup> Even the *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, which generally supported Seoul's war effort, opposed the additional deployment:

It is a matter of common sense to send more troops if we want to win the war. ... However, we are in a unique situation compared to other allies: we are confronting the North across the armistice line, frequently receiving guerrilla attacks, and under the threat of a large scale invasion. ... We believe there will be no change in the government's attitude [who said they would send no more troops to Vietnam].<sup>56</sup>

For South Koreans, it was hard to justify dispatching additional troops to Vietnam after experiencing such provocations from North Korea. Similarly, the *Dong-a Ilbo* editorial pressured the government to defend its position by arguing, "it does not make any sense that the

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<sup>54</sup> "Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State," 8 March 1968, FRUS, Document 186.

<sup>55</sup> "Chūngp'a ttajilt'ō [Discussing the Surge]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 15 March 1968.

<sup>56</sup> "Kukkun wōllam chūngp'asōl [The Issue of Dispatching Additional Troops to Vietnam]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 18 March 1968.

government is considering the additional deployment while they are also talking about the urgency of our own national security situation by suggesting all people arm themselves to defend our nation.”<sup>57</sup> In addition to unfavorable public opinion, Seoul recognized it was becoming increasingly more difficult to gain economic benefits from the U.S. in exchange for sending troops, as U.S. policy and conduct was changing in the Vietnam War.

In this regard, Chung’s offer could be understood as Seoul’s final attempt to bargain with Washington in an effort to gain maximum benefits from their increased participation. Since Washington also recognized Seoul’s objective, they were hesitant to respond. On 22 March, Seoul finally canceled their plan to send additional troops to Vietnam.<sup>58</sup> However, Washington still wanted additional Korean troops. When Johnson formally requested a light division at the two presidents’ meeting in Honolulu on 17 April, Park refused as “it would be ‘impossible’ for [me] to send more active soldiers to South Vietnam at present because of the situation in South Korea.”<sup>59</sup> At the same meeting, Park alternatively offered to send civilians first, attempting to reap some benefits from the U.S. while appeasing the public; however, that was not the option the U.S. wanted.

North Korea’s military provocations in January were the peninsula’s version of the “Tet Offensive,” which eventually influenced South Korea’s Vietnam War. Considering the effect and result of the provocations, North Korea’s military actions achieved the purpose of supporting North Vietnam. North Korea continued provoking South Korea on the peninsula after the Blue House Assault and *Pueblo* incident. In October 1968, 120 North Korean commandos infiltrated

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<sup>57</sup> “Kukkun wöllam chüngp’asöl [The Issue of Dispatching Additional Troops to Vietnam],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 15 March 1968.

<sup>58</sup> Sarantakes, “The Quiet War: Combat Operations Along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, 1966-1969,” 453.

<sup>59</sup> “Summary of Conversations Between President Johnson and President Pak,” 17 April 1968, FRUS, Document 194.

the East Coast of South Korea and engaged in guerrilla warfare. It was North Korea's the largest infiltration of South Korea and the South Korean government feared that only a strong retaliation would stop their threats. The South Korean government's fear was quickly becoming a reality. The 1968 national security crisis in South Korea stopped increased participation in the Vietnam War.

The conflict between the two countries and South Korea's move to stop escalating their participation effectively ended the "honeymoon" period in the U.S. and South Korea relationship that began with South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War. Although the two countries reached a settlement after the conflict, South Koreans' feeling of betrayal from the U.S. response to North Korea's military provocations was not easily forgotten. The friction with the U.S. led Seoul to be suspicious of Washington's promise to protect the national security of South Korea. Since the prospect of a U.S. alliance to bolster national security was one of South Korea's major motivations for participating in the Vietnam Conflict, the lukewarm response of the U.S. on the North Korean attacks weakened South Korea's political motivation for participating in Vietnam. Seoul needed time to restore their trust in Washington but events after 1969 prevented that from happening.<sup>60</sup> Complicating the relationship further, the U.S. changed their policy and conduct in Vietnam, so the initiatives of Washington and Seoul no longer aligned. Starting with the "Tet" in Korea, South Koreans gradually lost interest in the Vietnam War, and participating in the war became a secondary matter.

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<sup>60</sup> Jo Kap-je, *Nae mudōme ch'imūl paet'ōra* [Spit on my Grave], vol. 8 (Seoul: Chosun Ilbo sa, 2001), 197.

### “Korean Exceptionalism and Economic Benefits”: South Korea’s Response to Vietnamization

In mid-1968, the U.S. started to change their war policy in the Vietnam War. Johnson decided to de-escalate and halted bombing operations over the northern part of Vietnam. Washington and Hanoi first met in Paris on 10 May to start the peace negotiations. After Richard Nixon became President in 1969, the policy of Vietnamization began based on his election pledges to end U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. This policy strived to strengthen ARVN so they could defend South Vietnam by themselves while gradually reducing the number of U.S. troops. The U.S. force withdrawal in 1969 reduced U.S. military personnel to 475,000 by the end of 1969, 335,000 by the end of 1970, 156,000 by the end of 1971, 133,200 in January 1972, and 45,600—with no ground troops—in July 1972.<sup>61</sup> Compared to high-point of 543,500 troops in 1968, these numbers drastically decreased over the four-year withdrawal period. As a result, Vietnamization was not a path to victory; instead, it facilitated the withdrawal of U.S. forces while continuing negotiations with North Vietnam to end the war.

When its political motivations for the war diminished after 1968, South Korea faced Vietnamization. South Koreans externally expressed skepticism and questioned Washington’s Vietnamization. The Korean newspapers revealed public opinion. Firstly, they were concerned about the success of Vietnamization due to the poor condition of ARVN that lacked strength, leadership, and discipline.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, Vietnamization embodied the Koreans’ fear of abandonment by the U.S. One Korean media outlet stated that Washington should not resolve the

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<sup>61</sup> The U.S. forces had withdrawn after 1969: compared to its’ high point of the number of 543,500 in 1968, the U.S. military personnel in Vietnam was reduced to 133,200 in January of 1972, and it became 45,600 in July. For more information, see: Chõnp’yõnwi [War History Complication Committee], “Wõllam ch’amjõn t’onggye [A Statistics of the Dispatch in South Vietnam],” 1972, HB01620; Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 147; James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 10; Graham A. Cosmas, *The Joint Command in Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2006), 167.

<sup>62</sup> “Wõllamhwaüi puran [Anxiety on the Vietnamization],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 21 August 1969.

South Vietnam matter hastily, arguing “Vietnamization would bring suspicion on U.S.’s security pledge to Asian countries.”<sup>63</sup> Another Korean media outlet called for a change the U.S.’s negotiation policy, since the U.S. was de-escalating the war without corresponding to North Vietnam actions.<sup>64</sup>

Watching the U.S. start peace treaty negotiations with North Vietnam, the ROKFV’s special study in 1968 concluded that the retention of forces in South Vietnam would be necessary to maintain the economic benefits from the Vietnam War even after an armistice.<sup>65</sup> The study anticipated either the countries would reach an agreement by 1969 or their negotiations would last no later than 1970. Based on the assumption the peace treaty negotiations would conclude quickly, ROKFV focused on how South Korea could maintain and pursue its own interests in South Vietnam during the Vietnamization and post-war recovery after the armistice. Korean troops would fill the gap created by U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam and play an important role in civil affairs during the Vietnamization, eventually shifting their mission to reconstruction in post-war conditions.<sup>66</sup>

During their participation in the Vietnam War, South Korea enjoyed and were excited about for economic growth, which was called “Wöllambum.” South Korea’s GNP increased 2.5

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<sup>63</sup> “Chungdaegungmyöne chöbödün wöllamsat’ae [The Vietnam Conflict facing the Crisis],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 14 April 1969.

<sup>64</sup> “Kaeunch’i anün migugüi wöllamjön hyöpsangbanghyang [Precarious Direction of the U.S.’s Negotiation for the Vietnam War],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 10 May 1969.

<sup>65</sup> Chuwölsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], “T’ükpyöryön’gu che 4 ho: han’gugüi kukka anjönbojangül wihan chuwörhan’gukkunüi yök’al [A Special Study No. 4: The Role of ROKFV for the National Security of the Republic of Korea],” 25 June 1968, HB02327.

<sup>66</sup> Chuwölsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], “Chihwigwan hoeüirok [The Minute of the Commanders’ Meeting],” April-June 1968, HB01983; Chuwölsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], “T’ükpyöryön’gu che 3 ho: Kunsajök ch’üngmyönesö pon wöllamjön hyöpsang [A Special Study No. 3: The Negotiation of the Vietnam War in the Perspective of the Military Aspect],” HB02326; Baek Haeng-keol interview, 5 February 1970, *Chüngönül t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 130-131.

times during their participation in the war between 1964 and 1973.<sup>67</sup> Income from exports, direct economic aids from the U.S., and economic benefits from South Vietnam—such as the procurement of military goods, dispatch of labor, and contracts of construction and services—were sources of their economic stimulus. In early 1969, economic cooperation with South Vietnam accounted for 3.1 percent of South Korean GNP and was 19.3 percent of the entire foreign currency.<sup>68</sup> The economic cooperation with South Vietnam increased over the course of the war: 18.4 million dollars in 1965, 61.6 in 1966, 143.3 in 1967, 178.9 in 1968, and 183 in 1969. There were 15,571 Korean engineers and laborers in South Vietnam by the end of 1968.<sup>69</sup> Since growing the economy was a national goal “President Park had set for the Korean people the goal of economic self-sufficiency,” maintaining these economic benefits in South Vietnam was imperative for South Korea.<sup>70</sup>

While revealing the concern for the Vietnamization after it commenced, Seoul turned its focus inward towards how to maintain the economic benefits from the Vietnam War. South Korean politicians, in both the ruling and opposition party, also claimed that South Korea should and would actively join the reconstruction of South Vietnam as a source of income. A governmental study by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1969 focused on the countermeasure of Vietnamization and armistice. Unlike ROKFV’s study in 1968, this study

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<sup>67</sup> Charles R. Frank Jr., Kwang-suk Kim, and Larry E. Westphal, *Foreign Trade Regimes and Economic Development: South Korea* (The National Bureau of Economic Research, 1975), 17. <http://papers.nber.org/books/fran75-1> (accessed 3 January 2018).

<sup>68</sup> Chuwöl han’guk taesagwan [The ROK Embassy in South Vietnam], “Taewöl kyönghyöptaech’aek: hyujön’gwa kwallyönhayö [Countermeasure for the Copeartion with South Vietnam Related with the Armistice],” 27 January 1969, in *P’awölg’yöngghyöp* [Economic Cooperation in the Participation of the Vietnam War], Documents of ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>69</sup> “Taewöl kyöngghyöp’yönhwang [The Present Condition of the Cooperation with South Vietnam],” 23 December 1969, CA0006649, Documents of ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>70</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, “Call of the Prime Minister of Korea on the Secretary of State,” 2 April 1969 FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. 19, Part 1, Korea, 1969-1972, eds. Edward C. Keefer (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000), Document 6.

anticipated an early conclusion of the peace treaty would be difficult. The study predicted de-escalation would continue and the U.S. would not only maintain its supply base even after the armistice but also give maximum military and economic support to South Vietnam in order to defend against communists. It expected South Vietnam's path to economic independence to be lengthy due to the lack of technicians and the limited ability of the country's companies. Overall, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs study focused on how South Korea could keep their economic profits at the current level throughout the Vietnamization and the postwar period.

In addition to the specified detailed business plan, it listed phases for South Vietnam reconstruction. The initial phase would be six months of preparation followed by three years of reconstruction. The third and final phase would focus on developing the economy for seven years. To maintain their economic benefits, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs study emphasized continued negotiations with both the U.S. and South Vietnam to protect the existing business contracts, expand the construction business, increase exports, make additional contracts for military supplies, and continue supplying labor and technicians. By anticipating that the ROKFV would be the last foreign troops in South Vietnam, the study argued that stationing ROK forces in South Vietnam as long as possible was "key" in achieving this plan.<sup>71</sup>

Ultimately, the withdrawal and safety of the Korean forces amidst allied forces withdrawal should be discussed by Seoul. After the former Tiger Division commander and current Deputy Chief in Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maj. Gen. Yoo Byung-hyun's visit in Vietnam, Seoul concluded their withdrawal would generally accompany the U.S. troops withdrawal in their study of withdrawal and safety of ROKFV.<sup>72</sup> Yet, "ROKFV would stay as long as the U.S.

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<sup>71</sup> "Taewöl kyönghyöptaech'aek: hyujön'gwa kwallyönhayö [Countermeasure for the Copeartion with South Vietnam Related with the Armistice]," Documents of ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>72</sup> "Yubyöngghyön sojang p'awöl, chongjöndaech'aek hyöbüi [Major General Yoo Byung-hyun Went to Vietnam to Discuss about the Countermeasure for the End of the War]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 28 June 1969.

main forces do not leave Vietnam and the domestic situation allows.”<sup>73</sup> For more specifics, this study of military withdrawal and safety of ROKFV forecast that there would be no dramatic change for a while and the U.S. main forces would stay despite their gradual departure. It anticipated that like the 1969 study, the Paris talks would be prolonged because of the two sides’ conflict with the Viet Cong in the coalition government. It also predicted the Communists would not attempt a big-scale offensive like the Tet, but rather they would continue small-scale offensives in Vietnam. The study stipulated a strengthened and modernized ARVN would be pushed hard and it would take two to three years for stabilization. Finally, the study estimated the U.S. would continue to remove its troops from Vietnam but the main forces would stay without dramatic change.<sup>74</sup>

Therefore, this study suggested condition-based withdrawal. ROKFV would not withdraw during the Vietnamization period except in the following cases: “the sign of the peace treaty; the request from Saigon; the national security crisis in South Korea; and the main forces of the U.S. troops withdrawal.” If ROKFV had to withdraw, it should be based on an agreement with Washington and Saigon for a phased withdrawal that would not damage South Korea’s justification of participation nor impact the safety of Korean business in South Vietnam. This study furthermore suggested South Korea could receive the benefits even after their withdrawal. For example, ROKFV could be transferred to the reconstruction corps after the armistice.<sup>75</sup>

This study was also concerned with the safety of Korean troops. First, Washington’s decision to reduce its forces and their impatient negotiation position fueled the Korean public’s

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<sup>73</sup> “Chuwŏlmigunŭi ch’ŏlsue ttarŭn chuwŏrhan’gukkunŭi anjŏn mit ch’ŏlgune kwanhan yŏn’gusŏ [A Study for the Safety and the Withdrawal of ROKFV in Relation to U.S. Forces in South Vietnam’s Withdrawal],” 30 June 1969, Documents of ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

opinion to withdraw the Korean troops. A reduction of Korean casualties was needed to appease the public. Second, since the enemy might mainly target the Korean troops after the U.S. forces began to withdraw, ROKFV should be prepared to defend its safety. As a result, ROKFV needed to be modernized and strengthened. Upgrading ROKFV became another motive for Seoul to maintain its troops in the war.<sup>76</sup>

Prime Minister Chung's remarks during his meeting with cabinet members of Washington and President Nixon on 1 and 2 April reflected Seoul's view of Vietnamization. Firstly, Chung expressed a strong position on Washington's negotiation with Hanoi. He suggested taking strong actions like bombing the main cities and blocking ports to press Hanoi. Chung urged the U.S. to be patient and firm with the Communists and not to expect the situation to change quickly after the negotiations, arguing, "we should be prepared to fight for two or three years if necessary in order to avoid another Panmunjom agreement."<sup>77</sup> Chung strived to foster economic cooperation, and requested Washington bargain for South Korea to maintain their economic profits through rehabilitation in Vietnam over other countries, like Japan.<sup>78</sup>

Most importantly, Chung expressed that South Koreans' suspicions of the U.S. security pledge had been increasing since 1968. He notified Washington that Seoul would have political pressure to withdraw ROK troops in conjunction with the U.S. forces withdrawal from Vietnam. In this scenario, it would be a "political disaster" for the Korean government and "the psychological consequences of any reduction would be most serious," if the U.S. withdrew its forces from South Korea. Chung argued North Korea would invade the South again if the U.S. troops withdrew because USFK was "the key factor in preventing a war from breaking out

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 1 April 1969, FRUS, Document 5.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, "Call of the Prime Minister of Korea on the Secretary of State," 2 April 1969, FRUS, Document 6.

there... the principal objective of Kim Il-song is in fact to get the United States forces out” of South Korea.<sup>79</sup> Nixon inquired into the current development of South Korea and Chung mainly emphasized the importance of national security as he felt “the U.S. should maintain two divisions in Korea more after the Vietnamese War is over... [because] there must be balanced military power on the Korean peninsula.”<sup>80</sup> Chung also hoped that the U.S. would maintain military assistance of at least the current level of 160 million dollars a year.

On 15 April, two weeks after of Chung’s visit, the U.S. EC-121 Reconnaissance aircraft was shot down by a North Korean Mig-21 over the East Sea (Sea of Japan). Against the Nixon administration’s decision not to retaliate against North Korea, President Park complained to Porter that this happened as a result of their soft response to the Blue House and *Pueblo* aggressions in 1968, arguing, “this incident will be followed by others unless some strong reply is made.”<sup>81</sup> In his letter to Nixon on 1 May, Park again expressed his concern that “if the U.S. tolerates continued aggressive action by North Korea, morale in South Korea will be reduced.” Moreover, Park suggested a three-pronged initiative to deter the North Koreans: (1) strong retaliation, (2) increased U.S. air power in South Korea, (3) strengthened ROK forces, particularly Airforce.<sup>82</sup> Park urged that strengthening ROK forces was the most important aspect. Overall, national security—gained from the U.S. support—was foremost for Seoul.

On 25 July 1969 when the Nixon Doctrine was announced, Koreans’ suspicions about the U.S.’s disengagement amplified. With the label “Asia for Asians,” this new U.S. policy argued Asian countries should take responsibility for their own defense.<sup>83</sup> This primarily implied

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, FRUS, Document 5.

<sup>81</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, 18 April 1969, FRUS, Document 18.

<sup>82</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 1 May 1969, FRUS, Document 21.

<sup>83</sup> Editorial Note, FRUS, 1969-1976, vol. 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1972, eds. David S. Patterson (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2003), Document 29.

Vietnamization and the ending of American involvement in the Vietnam War. Furthermore, it was a shift in U.S. foreign policy worldwide as America's decreasing involvement and a gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops extended throughout Asia. The Nixon Doctrine would imply not only Vietnamization but "Koreanization" of the Korean Peninsula and the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from South Korea.<sup>84</sup> As a result, Koreans started to couple the Vietnam matter with the South Korean matter while hoping they would be the exemption to the U.S. new policy. From the Korean perspective, Vietnamization started too early to achieve peace, and might result in the communization of South Vietnam. Communization could happen not only in South Vietnam but also in South Korea if the USFK were to leave. This concern stemmed from their experience in the Korean War where a power vacuum on the Korean Peninsula brought the North's invasion of the South in 1950 with additional continuing military attacks after the armistice. South Koreans hoped and believed that South Korea would be an exception to the Nixon Doctrine, so the presence of Korean troops in Vietnam was still politically important at that moment. The *Kyunghyang Sinmun* suggested looking at the situation calmly, arguing, "the U.S. would realize the new policy and it has been already implied in South Vietnam. ... however, the matter in South Korea should not be applied by the general Asian policy."<sup>85</sup> At the same time, the South Koreans knew their position was dependent on the U.S. for their national security. This was why, while having a belief that South Korea would and should be an exception to the new U.S. disengagement policy, Seoul started to accelerate the modernization of troops, and the need for a self-reliant national defense capability emerged.

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<sup>84</sup> "Han'gukkwa niksūn tokt'ūrin [South Korea and Nixon Doctrine," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 9 August 1969.

<sup>85</sup> "Miguk shinaseajōngch'aekkwā Han'gugūi wich'i [The U.S.'s New Asian Policy and the Status of South Korea]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 14 August 1969.

For South Korea, the presence of ROK forces in Vietnam still could be used as a bargaining chip to prevent the USFK's withdrawal. This was why Seoul repeatedly showed their opposition to Vietnamization and withdrawal of their troops. As the *New York Times* stated, "South Korean officials are displeased with the withdrawals of the American Troops and plans of the Philippines and Australia to pull out of South Vietnam."<sup>86</sup> Before the Nixon-Park Summit on 20 August 1969, Korean officials emphasized the Korean forces' retention in Vietnam. Kim Dong-jo, the ROK ambassador in the U.S. said, "the Korean troops would not plan a phased withdrawal, unlike the U.S. troops."<sup>87</sup> ROKFV Commander General Lee Se-ho proclaimed that ROKFV would rather prepare for a long-term station in Vietnam.<sup>88</sup> President Park himself emphasized, "there would be no withdrawal [of ROK forces in Vietnam]. The only condition for withdrawal would be by a request from Saigon or achievement of the honorable peace in Vietnam."<sup>89</sup> After Park-Nixon Summit in San Francisco on 21 August, the Korean media expected South Korea to be an exception to the U.S. disengagement policy in Asia.<sup>90</sup> In this summit, Nixon promised not to withdraw U.S. forces from Korea, saying "we will honor the U.S.-ROK Defense Treaty."<sup>91</sup> He also appreciated the Korean's involvement in Vietnam and promised to keep discussing the Vietnam matter with Seoul. Nixon wrapped up the conversation,

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<sup>86</sup> *New York Times*, 21 December 1969.

<sup>87</sup> "Chuwŏrhan'gukkun pubun ch'ŏlsuŏpta [There Would be No Partial Withdrawal of ROKFV]," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, 7 August 1969.

<sup>88</sup> "Han'gukkunŭn ohiryŏ changgijjudun chunbi [The Korean Troops are Rather Preparing a Long-term Station]," *Maeil Business Newspaper*, 6 August 1969.

<sup>89</sup> "Han'guk anbo 70nyŏni kobi [1970 would be the Crucial Moment for the South Korean National Security]," *Kyungyang Shinmun*, 18 August 1969.

<sup>90</sup> "Miŭi sae ajujŏngch'aek han'gukŭn yeoe ipchŭng [South Korea Became an Exemption from New U.S. Asian Policy]," *Kyungyang Shinmun*, 23 August 1969.

<sup>91</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, "Talks Between President Nixon and President Pak," 21 August 1969, FRUS, Document 35.

“It is a little noisy outside, but please remember that 98 percent of the American people are Korea’s friends.”<sup>92</sup>

### **Lost Cause: The Decline of South Korea’s Motivation for the War**

As described in Chapter 1, one of the main motivators for South Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War was to prevent the U.S. troops’ withdrawal from South Korea. Seoul proposed sending the combat troops to Vietnam in 1965 as a countermeasure to the Pentagon’s discussion of the U.S. troop reduction in Korea. It worked as a bargaining chip with the U.S. to achieve Seoul’s objectives. South Koreans justified their participation: “If we don’t go to Vietnam, the U.S. troops would leave South Korea for Vietnam and this would bring a disaster of North Korea’s invasion.”<sup>93</sup> Koreans viewed the U.S. forces in their country as a “tripwire” to guarantee their security. In this regard, participation in the Vietnam War was a patriotic duty for national security, and essentially the country’s safety and survival. Acting as a “stabilizing force” in this region, the primary role of the U.S. military in South Korea was to deter war in the Korean peninsula.<sup>94</sup> A total of 64,000 U.S. troops, including the two Army divisions, had been stationed in South Korea after the Korean War. Thus, both in the U.S. and South Korea, withdrawal or reduction of U.S. troops from South Korea had always been handled with sensitivity in the political and diplomatic arena.

Although Washington was concerned that the South’s retaliation on the North would automatically involve the U.S. forces, George Newman, Ambassador Porter’s deputy, recalled

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<sup>92</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, “Talks Between President Nixon and President Pak,” FRUS, Document 35.

<sup>93</sup> Seo Woo-in, author’s interview, 28 May 2018, Sōnuga (Japanese Restaurant), Seoul, South Korea.

<sup>94</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 31 October 1978), 52-53.

that he and Porter did not even consider making the suggestion of withdrawal of USFK during South Korea's national security crisis of 1968 because the U.S. "saw the role of Korean troops in Vietnam as so important."<sup>95</sup> Even after President Johnson decided to deescalate the Vietnam Conflict and started a peace treaty with North Vietnam, they opposed any troop reduction in South Korea, "especially while ROK troops were fighting in Vietnam."<sup>96</sup> Therefore, even though new President Nixon announced the U.S.'s disengagement policy from Asia, Seoul still firmly believed the U.S. promise of not withdrawing their troops from South Korea in return for sending combat troops to Vietnam. It was confirmed by both General Beach in a September 1965 letter and President Nixon in his meeting with President Park in August 1969. Contrary to the Korean's belief that South Korea had a "special relationship" with the U.S. and thus would be an exemption from the Nixon Doctrine, Washington discussed the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea based on the interests of the U.S. Even before the meeting with Park, the NSC meeting on 14 August 1969 reviewed the withdrawal of two U.S. divisions and complete modernization of ROK 18 divisions for their self-defense against North Korea. Nixon asked, "Will it affect Park's visit?" and Secretary of State William Rogers replied, "No. Say nice things about Korea."<sup>97</sup>

The withdrawal of its forces from South Korea was already a foregone conclusion when the U.S. started Vietnamization and announced the Nixon Doctrine. On 24 November 1969, Nixon instructed National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to present a withdrawal plan, "I think the time has come to reduce our Korean presence. We could not do so because of the EC 121 at any earlier date but I do not want us to continue to temporize with this problem."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>97</sup> Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, 14 August 1969, FRUS, Document 34.

<sup>98</sup> Memorandum from President Nixon to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), 24 November 1969. FRUS, Document 45.

Washington's decision to withdraw forces from South Korea was consistent with the Nixon Doctrine. Nixon intended to demonstrate to the American people that he would fulfill his pledge to decrease troop deployments in Asia.<sup>99</sup> From the beginning of Washington's scheme, the fact that South Korea participated in the Vietnam War as an ally of the U.S. was not even a consideration. Rather, Washington implemented the disengagement plan in South Korea to give that impression that they were not retreating from Vietnam but conducting Vietnamization based on their new disengagement policy in Asia. Nixon wanted to demonstrate that his doctrine would be applied to all of Asia, and to legitimize his doctrine, Korea seemed the best possibility for implementing the doctrine outside of Vietnam.

Washington's study of the reduction of U.S. forces in South Korea under the leadership of Kissinger began in February 1969 and was submitted to Nixon in January 1970.<sup>100</sup> This study suggested the reduction of the U.S. troops in South Korea specifically by removing "both U.S. Army divisions; remove one division; or leave only several brigades."<sup>101</sup> Based on this study, Washington started an internal discussion to determine the size of the U.S. forces, the degree of size and modernization of the ROK divisions, and the timing of U.S. withdrawals.<sup>102</sup> From the beginning, deciding whether or not to withdraw their troops was not the subject of the discussion. Instead, the study strived to ascertain the strength level South Korea needed to defend themselves with the reduced U.S. forces. Disagreeing with the Joint Chiefs of Staff who argued that more Korean and U.S. troops were required to defend South Korea, Kissinger believe one U.S. Army division plus between 16 and 18 improved and modernized ROK divisions could

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<sup>99</sup> *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations*, 61-63.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Draft Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, 4 March 1970, FRUS, Document 55.

maintain “clear superiority” over North Korea’s forces and hold a combined North Korean and Chinese attack for at least 30 days north of Seoul.<sup>103</sup> Even though this discussion would apparently be related to South Korea’s national security, opinions of Seoul or ROK military were totally excluded from Washington’s decision-making process. Finally, Nixon decided to withdraw the 7th Division, move the 2d Division out of DMZ to the rear area, and simultaneously offer a modernization program for the ROK military with Congressional approval. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird considered this plan as “Koreanization” to implement “phased withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Korea, with a first cut of 20,000 troops, followed several years later by another.”<sup>104</sup> Secretary Rogers, in the same vein, stated that “the second [phase] would be additional reductions after the ROK divisions return from Vietnam.”<sup>105</sup>

Washington wanted their withdrawal plan to be carried out within Seoul’s initiative and aimed to prevent the optics that the U.S. was abandoning its ally South Korea.<sup>106</sup> However, a problem arose with South Korea’s strong opposition to Washington’s reduction plan. On 27 March when the U.S. unilaterally notified President Park in an effort to gain his support of the decision, Park experienced “profound shock.”<sup>107</sup> Washington could not reach an agreement because of Seoul’s stiff resistance. On 26 May, after he received an opposition letter from Park, Nixon attempt to placate Park, “I am not proposing a total withdrawal of United State forces such as the one in 1949 to which you referred in your letter. ... The forces remaining will

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<sup>103</sup> Memorandum from Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), “ROK Force Capabilities,” 26 February 1970, FRUS, Document 53.

<sup>104</sup> *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations*, 63.

<sup>105</sup> Draft Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, 4 March 1970, FRUS, Document 55.

<sup>106</sup> *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations*, 63; Draft Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, FRUS, Document 55.

<sup>107</sup> Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, 23 April 1970, FRUS, Document 57; *Investigation of Korean-American Relations, Report*, 63.

provide not only substantial United States military capacity but also clear evidence of a United States commitment.” Regarding Park’s concern for the guarantee of the modernization of its forces, Nixon wrote, “subject to Congressional approval, I propose to provide substantially higher military assistance over the period 1971–75 for Korean modernization.”<sup>108</sup> However, Park resisted Nixon’s proposal on the grounds he could not agree to any U.S. forces’ withdrawals before the modernization of the Korean troops.<sup>109</sup> Watching Seoul’s continuous resistance, Ambassador Porter advised Nixon, “we [must] not react hurriedly in sense of further argument with [Seoul]. I suggest we [should] keep it cool, continue our planning ...”<sup>110</sup>

Washington’s decision was unacceptable for Seoul for the following reasons. First, it was a betrayal of their trust in the U.S. and they feared abandonment. Second, South Korea understood that withdrawal of U.S. forces translated directly into the weakening of their national security. National security was a priority for Seoul. Third, facing the presidential election in April 1971, this news would be a big shock for the Park Government. This issue not only harmed its national security but it would also psychologically impact South Korean’s morale and negatively effect Park’s popularity in the upcoming election. As a result, Seoul defied Washington’s expectation and strongly resisted the proposal, refusing to cooperate with Washington.

In addition to the government, the Korean public was extremely disappointed, concerned, and angry with the U.S. plan to withdraw the troops from South Korea. They still believed that South Korea would be exempt from the Nixon Doctrine and their troops in Vietnam could be used as a bargaining chip to prevent Washington’s withdrawal. The opposition party

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<sup>108</sup> Letter from President Nixon to Korean President Park, 26 May 1970, FRUS, Document 58.

<sup>109</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, 29 May 1970, FRUS, Document 59.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

requested the details of President Park's countermeasure and suggested withdrawing ROKFV from Vietnam in the current situation.<sup>111</sup> The Defense Committee in the National Assembly wanted to know what countermeasure Seoul planned to take and some hardliners strongly argued to withdraw ROKFV from Vietnam altogether as a countermeasure.<sup>112</sup> Seoul was not able to provide an answer but denied the rumor. Also, there was a view that withdrawal of USKF was the U.S.'s intention to push ROKFV to move into other TAOR and expand their role. Saigon expected South Korea to send one division to the Cambodia campaign in order to prevent the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea.<sup>113</sup> In fact, South Vietnam was also sensitive to this issue because they worried that the withdrawal of USFK would result in ROKFV's withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>114</sup> Although they had a different interest in the Vietnam War, South Korea and South Vietnam, at least at this moment, were united against the U.S.'s disengagement policy.

In early July 1970, after Washington realized that receiving support from Seoul would be impossible, they officially notified Seoul about their plan to withdraw the U.S. forces.<sup>115</sup> On 11 July, Prime Minister Chung Il-kwon reported to the National Assembly and confirmed this as a fact, stating that his cabinet was willing to resign if their negotiation with the U.S. did not satisfy the Korean people.<sup>116</sup> Washington considered these remarks as an attempt to bargain with

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<sup>111</sup> Chuhanmigun kamch'unngnon ttajyō [Attacking the Discussion of the Reduction of USFK],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 6 May 1970.

<sup>112</sup> “Kuk'oe kukpangwi chuhanmigun ch'ōlsusōl ch'ugung [Defense Committee, Remonstrating the Theory of Withdrawal of USFK],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 16 April 1970; “Kukpangwi, chuhanmigun kamch'uksōl kyōngwi chōngbu taech'aek ttajyō [Defense Committee, Demanding the Countermeasure of the Government Against the Theory of the Reduction of USFK],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 30 May 1970.

<sup>113</sup> “Niksūn tokt'ūrin han'guk'waūi chint'ong [Nixon Doctrine and the Pain of Koreanization], *Dong-a Ilbo*, 9 July 1970; “Han'gukkwa miguk shiryōnūi chōnhwan'gi [Ordeal of Transition of South Korea and the U.S.],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 21 July 1970.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> “Mijōngbu chōngbu chōngshik t'onggo [Formal Notification to Seoul from Washington],” *Maeil Business Newspaper*, 8 July 1970; “Niksūn tokt'ūrin han'guk'waūi chint'ong,” *Dong-a Ilbo*.

<sup>116</sup> “Chōng ch'ongni AP kijawa hoegyōn [Minister Chung talked with the AP News Reporter],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 14 July 1970; *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations*, 65.

Washington to gain the U.S. promise to modernize the Korean troops before their withdrawal. Regarding the public's opposition to the U.S. plan, Porter said that Seoul had created and exploited public dismay over the possibility of a troop withdrawal to impress upon the U.S. the depth of their annoyance. Washington did not take ROK Ambassador Kim Dong-jo's statement seriously and as long as the Vietnam war was being fought, he did not think the U.S. had any intention of reducing forces in Korea.<sup>117</sup> During ROK-U.S. Defense Ministerial meeting in Honolulu from 22 to 23 July, both sides could not compromise on the implement action of the U.S.'s plan.<sup>118</sup>

The fact that the U.S. troops would leave from Korea was not likely to be amendable in the negotiation with Seoul. Therefore, the only thing Seoul could do was receive a guarantee for national security support from Washington, which now meant to modernize its troops before the U.S. withdrawal. To achieve this goal, Seoul tried to bargain with Washington by emphasizing North Korea's threat and reminding the U.S. of their promise of aid in return for South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War. In his meeting with Porter and USFK commander General John Michaeli on 4 August, President Park "reiterated his 'regret and displeasure' at U.S. action and stated again he would not participate until satisfactory conclusion could be drawn from modernization talks."<sup>119</sup> Park's intention was not only to bargain with the U.S., but he actually felt betrayed by Washington because he thought that President Nixon assured him that the doctrine would not be applied to Korea during his meeting with Nixon during the previous year. On 24 through 26 August, Vice President Agnew went to Seoul for direct talks with Park; however, the two disagreed on the sequence of the ROK forces' modernization in terms of the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, "Korean Troop Reduction Plans," 23 July 1970, FRUS, Document 66.

<sup>119</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, 4 August 1970, FRUS, Document 68.

reduction of U.S. forces. After the meeting, Agnew described Park's behavior as "absolutely offensive." Moreover, on his way to Taiwan after meeting Park, Agnew stated that he "had no problem with removing the 2d Division because all U.S. forces were to be withdrawn within 5 years anyway."<sup>120</sup> This remark greatly upset Koreans. On 29 August, Korean newspapers reported U.S. troops had already been reduced by 10,000 based on an announcement of the Pentagon.<sup>121</sup> Koreans' concern that the U.S. might abandon them reached a peak.

At the same time, the Korean forces in Vietnam faced the controversy over whether or not they were the mercenaries of the U.S. In August 1970, the U.S. Senate passed a bill to stop paying the overseas allowance for service in Vietnam, which was the monthly salary for the Korean soldiers. If this bill was approved, Seoul thought they could no longer retain their forces in Vietnam.<sup>122</sup> Both the ruling and opposition party argued to withdraw their forces from Vietnam, regarding the U.S. Senate's decision as pressure to withdraw South Koreans from Vietnam.<sup>123</sup> The ROK Ministry of Defense also understood that this decision would lead South Korea to pull its forces out of Vietnam. The Defense Minister Chung Rae-hyuk answered against the press, "if the U.S. stopped this bill, this would bring damage to the face of South Korea and the U.S. and the cause of our participation." The *Dong-a Ilbo* claimed, "there is a limit in our patience and temperance," and "it is very unpleasant some U.S. politicians regard Koreans as mercenaries." The *Kyunghyang Shinmun* was concerned about the viewpoint in the U.S. that regarded Korean soldiers in Vietnam as mercenaries and calmly stated, "it is difficult to expect

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<sup>120</sup> "Aegŭnyu hoegyŏn [Interview with Agnew]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 27 August 1970. *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations*, 67.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*; "Migun imi ch'ŏlsu [The U.S. Forces had Already been Withdrawn]," 28 August 1970.

<sup>122</sup> "Sashilsang ch'ŏlgun kangyo [Actual Enforcement for the Withdrawal]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 22 August 1970.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

this bill would be approved by Nixon, but the Senate decision gave us a shock.”<sup>124</sup> The editorial of the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* commented:

Our participation was based on the justification of protecting freedom and peace of Asia by defending Communist’s invasion in South Vietnam. The direct motivation to accept the U.S.’s request for participation was to pay back the U.S. who helped us in the Korean War. The U.S. paid the oversea payment for us based on the Brown Memorandum because we could not burden them. ... Therefore this act is too mean and betrayed the friend forces who fought together on the battlefield. The problem is not the amount of money but the act itself which broke the promise based on the memorandum. This is a totally different age. Koreans are now arguing to withdraw our forces from Vietnam.”<sup>125</sup>

Together with the reduction plan of the U.S. forces, the Senate’s decision to stop paying ROKFV weakened South Koreans’ motivation for fighting in the Vietnam War. The Korean public suggested withdrawing its forces from Vietnam immediately if the bill was approved. At the same time, the Koreans thought that defining their soldiers as U.S. mercenaries in the global world was out of reason. They thought it was shameful.<sup>126</sup> While this might be a truth that Seoul and the Korean people wanted to hide, many Koreans believed that they went to Vietnam for their country and it justified their participation. Even though their individual motivation was to earn economic profits, they obviously did not want to be regarded as the U.S. mercenaries. Even though the bill was not signed by Nixon, South Koreans no longer supported their war effort in Vietnam.

ROK forces continued to be embroiled in the mercenary controversy. During the Symington Subcommittee Hearings in September 1970, the Brown Memorandum was disclosed to the public. The Brown Memorandum, written by the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea

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<sup>124</sup> “Migugūi shinūiwa sangwōnūi yangshik [The Truth of America and the Good Sense of the Senate],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 4 September 1970.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

Winthrop G. Brown in 1966, promised the following benefits to South Korea in return for their participation: (1) to equip and pay all Korean troops in Vietnam, (2) to provide military assistance and modernize ROK army, and (3) to provide economic assistance, for example, to procure products and services from South Korea for Vietnam and allow South Korea to participate in construction projects.<sup>127</sup> The *New York Times* reported, “A Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee disclosed today that the dispatch of 50,000 South Korean soldiers to fight in South Vietnam had cost the United States more than \$1-billion in the last five years.”<sup>128</sup> Concerning the subcommittee members’ claim of secret business with South Korea, Porter contended that South Korea had sent troops “to answer the South Vietnamese and American calls for assistance and they desired to repay in this manner sacrifices that Americans and others had made for them in Korea in 1950.”<sup>129</sup> However, Porter’s argument seemed less persuasive as Senator J.W. Fulbright argued, “It does not really add up very well that this is a great gesture of self-sacrifice on the part of Korea to pay their obligation. They were simply making a good business deal at our request and urging.”<sup>130</sup> Moreover, Seoul was sensitive to Porter’s answer to the question of whether South Koreans believe that there would be no reduction of USFK as long as ROKFV stays in Vietnam. Porter answered that the U.S. never promised not to withdraw USFK from South Korea.<sup>131</sup> This hearing and disclosure of the Brown memorandum not only embarrassed Washington and Seoul—for Seoul, it was another betrayal—but also exacerbated

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<sup>127</sup> Frank Baldwin, “The American Utilization of South Korean Troops in Vietnam,” 10-11. Folder 17, Box 33, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA; “Pūraun kaksō [The Brown Memorandum],” 4 March 1966, in Documents of the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, HB02657.

<sup>128</sup> “Korea’s Vietnam Troops Cost U.S. \$1-Billion,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1970. <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/13/archives/koreas-vietnam-troops-cost-us-1billion.html> (accessed 15 December 2018)

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> “Saimingt’ōn ch’ōngmullok yoyak [Abstract of Symington Subcommittee Hearings], 2 October 1970, in Documents of the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, HB02623.

controversy over the South Korean forces that they were indeed the U.S. mercenaries who wanted blood money.<sup>132</sup> Although the South Korean mass media and the government strongly denied this claim, this mercenary controversy resonated with the South Korean public and negatively impacted morale and support for the Vietnam War.<sup>133</sup>

The relationship between South Korea and U.S. struggled during 1970 and the strain eventually influenced the South Korean policy in the Vietnam War. Together with the withdrawal of the U.S. forces, the controversy of understanding the Korean forces as mercenaries, triggered the domestic public to turn against the war and hurt the cause and justification to continue to fight in Vietnam. Even though South Koreans did not formally protest their continued participation in the conflict, they started to doubt why the Korean troops should stay in Vietnam, especially while other allied troops were already withdrawing. In November 1970, the *Dong-a Ilbo* argued, “the withdrawal of ROKFV should and must be considered.”<sup>134</sup> This article understood that retention of ROKFV had already lost their cause and justification in the domestic and international arena. Moreover, the U.S. withdrawal of forces from South Vietnam resulted in the expansion of ROKFV’s TAOR, which became a heavy burden for the Korean forces in Vietnam. During the Vietnamization, ROKFV faced numerous problems: lack of morale and discipline, passiveness, and lack of support and supplies from the U.S. and South Vietnamese. This newspaper article, interestingly, was concerned with the attitude of South Vietnamese. It argued that the official image of South Vietnamese appreciation for the South

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<sup>132</sup> “Brown Kak-seo [the Brown Memorandum],” 4 March 1966, HB02657.

<sup>133</sup> “Shiryōnmajūn hanmigwan'gye [ROK-U.S. Relations Are Now in Trouble],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 16 September 1970; “Saimingt’ōnwisō pulgōjin miūi taehanjōngch'aek chōnmo [The Reveal of U.S.’s Policy on Korea through Symington Committee], *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 18 September 1970; “Saimingt’ōn ch’ōngmullogūi p’amun [The Scandal Caused by Symington Hearings],” *JoongAng Ilbo*, 17 September 1970. <https://news.join.com/article/1255720> (accessed 15 December 2018). Among many of newspaper articles on this effect, these three are most analytical and representative.

<sup>134</sup> “Hūdūllinūn chwap'yo [A Shaky Coordinate],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 7 November 1970.

Koreans for their bravery in fighting and contributions to the civil action, would bring a misjudgment in understanding South Vietnamese. South Vietnamese had a unique feeling for the foreigners and did not just feel thankful toward the Koreans. Therefore, South Koreans at least should withdraw alongside the U.S. forces. The essence of withdrawal was how to make it honorable and beneficial to South Korea. It should be based on a good relationship with South Vietnam and expanded influence surrounding post-war South Vietnam in the international arena in order to maintain economic benefits.<sup>135</sup>

The public pressure for the withdrawal of ROK forces from Vietnam had been mounting in 1970, and it became a huge pressure point for Park who faced an upcoming election. The withdrawal of the Korean forces from Vietnam became one of the main issues in the presidential election of April 1971. Kim Dae-jung, a candidate from the opposition party running against Park, called for the immediate withdrawal of the Korean troops from Vietnam, while President Park hesitated to make a decision.<sup>136</sup> Against the domestic political pressure to leave South Vietnam, Seoul had been justifying their retention based on the claim, “since the Communists’ invasion of South Vietnam is not only limited to the safety of South Vietnam but also a threat to the peace and safety of entire free Asia, we have conducted our responsibility to the collective security in this region.”<sup>137</sup> However, this claim became less persuasive with the U.S. forces’ ongoing disengagement from Vietnam and Korea. After they lost the cause and justification for the participation, Seoul could no longer justify their soldiers sacrifice in the Vietnam War with

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> “Kimdaejung hubo 70 nyōndae han'gugogyoyōnsōl [Candidate Kim Dae-jung’s Speech on the Korean Diplomacy in the 1970s],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 31 October 1970; “Pak taet’ongnyōng ibōnman ch’ulma kanūng [This will be the Last Time for President Park Running for the Election],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 5 March 1971; “Yōya sōn’gō kongyak taegyōl [A Confrontation of Election Pledges Between the Ruling Party and the Opposition Party],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 3 April 1971.

<sup>137</sup> “Chuwōl kukkun che’lch’a ch’ōlsu kyehoek palp’yoe chūūmhan tamhwamun [A Statement of President Park for Announcing the First Withdrawal Plan of ROKFV],” 16 November 1971, The Speech Collection of President Park, no. 8, Republic of Korea Presidential Archives.

the economic benefit alone. Moreover, it became evident that there would not be a victory in the war after Vietnamization started. On 11 November 1970, ROKFV Commander General Lee Se-ho wrote to President Park, “willing or not, the free world military is now approaching the end of the war. ROKFV would have to be also in the process of withdrawing between early 1971 and 1974 at the latest.”<sup>138</sup> Park revealed his will for the withdrawal, “it is not a good idea for us to remain in Vietnam by ourselves alone especially considering the domestic politics and international public opinion.”<sup>139</sup> In January 1971, President Park announced his intention to withdraw the troops from South Vietnam in his new year press conference.<sup>140</sup> On 6 February, Seoul had to accept the U.S. forces withdrawal from Korea and announced the joint communique. By 27 March, the U.S. 7th Division withdrew from South Korea. Seoul formally announced their phased withdrawal plan from Vietnam in April. As a first step, 17,000 troops would withdraw between December 1971 to June 1972.

This decision revealed some of the complexity of the South Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War. Since they lost the cause to stay in Vietnam, Seoul finally decided to withdraw in phases to maintain the economic benefits as long as possible. South Korea could not easily banish the lingering affection for the Vietnam War which spurred economic growth and profits as well as a future bargaining chip with the U.S. The series of events from 1968 to 1971—national security crisis, Vietnamization and the Nixon Doctrine, withdrawal of the U.S. troops from South Korea, and the mercenary controversy with Korean soldiers in Vietnam—caused a rift with the U.S. and destroyed South Koreans motivation to sacrifice their soldiers in Vietnam.

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<sup>138</sup> Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam], vol. 10 (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1985), 428.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> “Yöñch’o kija hoegyön [New Year Press Conference],” 11 January 1971, The Speech Collection of President Park, no 8, Presidential Archives.

The patriotic motivation to defend their country prevalent in the early years of the participation no longer existed. As a result, the remaining two years before the Korean soldiers finally withdrew in March 1973 became an opportunity for South Koreans to simply maintain economic profits.

## Chapter 7

### “Why Are We in This War?”: ROKFV in the Vietnamization Phase, 1969-1973

#### Leadership Change: ROKFV’s Response and Conduct in the Vietnamization Period

On 1 May 1969, South Korea altered its military leadership as facing a new war landscape driven by the Vietnamization effort. Lt. Gen. Lee Se-ho became the commander of the Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROKFV), replacing Lt. Gen. Chae Myung-shin.<sup>1</sup> Although he was recognized as a traditional type of field commander, Lee had experience with irregular warfare, as the G-3 of the 8th Division during the Korean War.<sup>2</sup> Before becoming the ROKFV Commander, he rendered distinguished service as the 6th Corps commander, destroying the North Korean commandos during the Blue House raid in January 1968. Moreover, Lee already had considerable knowledge about the Vietnam War. He was a principal of the ROK delegation who visited South Vietnam for a month negotiating the working arrangement with

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<sup>1</sup> Both Chae and Lee left memoirs. The followings are about Chae: Chae Myung-shin, *Sasōnūl nōmgonōmō* [Beyond death] (Seoul: Maeil Business Newspaper, 1994); Chae Myung-shin, Chae Myung-shin, *Pet’ūnamjōnjaenggwa na* [The Vietnam War and I] (Seoul: P’albogwōn, 2006); Park Kyung-suk, *Chōnjaengyōngung ch’aemyōngshin changgun* [A War Hero General Chae] (Seoul: P’albogwōn, 2018). Lee left his memoir, Lee Se-ho, *Han’gillo sōmgyōttōn nae choguk* [The nation I served] (Seoul: Taeyangmido, 2009). When Chae and Lee passed away in the same year of 2013, Lee’s death did not receive any attention compared to Chae who received public spotlight for his will to bury him in the grave yard for enlisted soldiers instead of generals. Chae had a good reputation and his term as a ROKFV commander has been described as highly successful, although he did not promote to a full general because of a friction with President Park on Park’s becoming a permanent president. In contrast although he became promoted to a full general and the army chief of staff, Lee is a forgotten general, and the evaluation on him as a commander in Vietnam is generally not good. Some of the veterans give harsh comments on him. Based on my interview during May 2018, most retired officers said that General Lee ruined ROKFV’s achievement in the Vietnam War.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, *Han’gillo sōmgyōttōn nae choguk*, 258-273. The ROK 8th Division participated in COIN operations around Jiri Mountain from May 1951 to February 1952.

U.S. MACV and ARVN before the actual South Korean combat troops' dispatch in October 1965.<sup>3</sup>

Lt. Col. Kim Sun-hyŏn, operations officer of ROKFV, compared the two commanders' leadership and conduct of the war:

General Chae emphasized maximum benefits with minimum casualties. His idea was that we went to Vietnam for our countries' own interests and this should be our purpose of fighting here. Therefore, to put it simply, there is no need to die here. However, General Lee, who was more like a field commander and had distinguished himself in the Blue House raid, questioned: "Why do we not attack the enemy?" It is a soldier who fights when an enemy appears. Soldiers should not make a political judgment.<sup>4</sup>

Based on Lt. Col. Kim's evaluation, General Chae emphasized that the Korean forces should play a diplomatic role to gain "maximum benefit with minimum casualties" in the war, while the new commander, General Lee, thought the Korean forces should be "real" soldiers who are more aggressive and take initiative in fighting. Kim's argument can be simply understood from the viewpoint that most successors want to make a more significant achievement than their predecessors. Furthermore, the incoming commander's difference can loom large on a subordinates' perspective. Nevertheless, his argument demands additional examination in the context of the U.S.'s "Vietnamization of the War," particularly with regards to how South Korean forces in Vietnam understood and responded to this new reality. Additionally, this raises questions as to why General Lee emphasized offensive combat operations such as "search and destroy," that aligned with the U.S. Army's conventional way of conducting the Vietnam War. In

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 320-341. For more details, see Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Sun-hyŏn interview, 4 February 1970, Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], vol. 1 (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso, 2001), 137-138.

fact, some argue that the U.S. forces began to give more weight to pacification operations rather than relying on their conventional search and destroy operations under the new MACV commander General Creighton Abrams who assumed leadership in the Vietnamization.<sup>5</sup>

Based on their special study which concluded that the retention of forces in South Vietnam would be necessary and beneficial for the national interest of South Korea even after an armistice, ROKFV set a goal to justify their future retention of troops in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> In the middle of 1968 when Washington stopped escalating the war and started the peace talks with North Vietnam, ROKFV began preparations for the armistice: “(1) to pacify 100% of the TAOR by continuing active search and destroy operations and denial of enemy into the territory; (2) to develop military diplomacy and well-planned civil affair and psychological warfare in order to receive request to maintain ROK forces in South Vietnam; and (3) to develop the diplomatic activity to participate in post-war reconstruction (government’s role).”<sup>7</sup> Based on the assumption that the U.S. would never totally withdraw, Koreans intended to display their contribution to the war effort through successful pacification of TAOR with active combat operations and well-planned civil affairs operations.

When Vietnamization began in earnest in 1969, ROKFV set a goal to benefit from their deployment to Vietnam while the Paris peace talks developed.<sup>8</sup> Having their future plan in mind,

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<sup>5</sup> Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 290. For more details about the discussion on the change of the U.S. strategy during the Vietnam War, see: Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999); Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011); Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], “T’ūkpyōryōn’gu che 4 ho: Han’gugūi kukka anjōnbojangūl wihan chuwōrhan’gukkunūi yōk’al [A Special Study No. 4: The Role of ROKFV for the National Security of the Republic of Korea],” 25 June 1968, HB02327.

<sup>7</sup> “Chihwigwan hoeūirok [The Minute of Senior Commanders’ Meeting],” April-June 1968, HB01983.

<sup>8</sup> Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], “Hullyōng [Directives],” January 1969, HB02154 (90-1983); Baek Haeng-keol, *Chūngōnūl t’onghae pon pet’ūnam chōnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, 5 February 1970, Kukpangbu

General Chae (see Figure 14) focused first on the civic action operation. According to the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (G-3) of ROKFV, Col. Han Min-seok, ROK forces conducted both combat and civil affairs operations on a 50:50 ratio initially, but shifted to 30:70 in 1968 and then 10:90 in 1969 before General Chae left Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> Col. Baek Haeng-keol, assistant chief of staff of ROKFV, added, “ROKFV focused 90% on a civil affairs operation and 10% on a combat operation in 1969, however after Lee Se-ho became commander, ROKFV placed more importance on combat operations.”<sup>10</sup>



Figure 14. The First ROKFV Commander Lt. Gen. Chae Myung-shin (August 1965-April 1969). Reprinted with permission from the Republic of Korea Army.

After General Lee Se-ho (see Figure 15) became a commander of ROKFV, he placed emphasis on conducting combat operations. He emphasized the “fighting spirit” and offensive combat operations for his troops. When General Lee first gave instructions to subordinate commanders on 1 May 1969, he outlined, “ROKFV should have a solid resolution to destroy

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kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chūngŏnūl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies] (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso, 2001), vol.1, 129.

<sup>9</sup> Han Min-seok interview, August 1969, *Chūngŏnūl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 126-127.

<sup>10</sup> Baek Haeng-keol interview, *ibid.*, 130.

every Communist, smash the enemy's wicked plots, and heighten security, since the Communists would conduct a fierce battle to gain an advantage in negotiation during the later phase of the war.”<sup>11</sup> In his first quarterly senior commanders' meeting on 25 July 1969, Lee developed his guideline for the operation to “destroy the enemy” by “striking them first.” He added, “[Korean soldiers must] find and destroy the enemy by attacking them first and making the Vietnam front a real battle training field for the Korean army.”<sup>12</sup> According to the statistics by ROKFV, his objectives increased the number of Korean combat troop operations during the period. The actual number of ROKFV's large-scale combat operations (above battalion level) grew in 1969 and 1970 (see Table 1). Small-scale combat operations (below company level) also swelled until 1971. At the end of 1969, ROKFV concluded that “this year is characterized as an aggressive first strike based on commander Lee Se-ho's operational guideline [emphasizing offensive combat operations] in addition to the pacification operations.”<sup>13</sup>



Figure 15. The Second ROKFV Commander, Lt. Gen Lee Sae-ho (May 1969-March 1973). Reprinted with permission from the Republic of Korea Army.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, *Han'gillo sŏngyŏttŏn nae choguk*, 384.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 407-409; “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” in Lee Se-ho, *Pyŏlch'aek sŏhanmunjip* [Collection of Documents and Pictures], 155-363 (Seoul: Taeyangmido, 2009), 158-161.

<sup>13</sup> “Chuwŏlgun 69nyŏn chŏn'gwa [The ROKFV's Military Achievements of 1969],” *Maeil Business Newspaper*, 30 December 1969.

Table 1. Number of ROKFV Combat Operations

Operation Type	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	Total
Small-Scale	2,206	38,722	73,448	96,907	89,002	102,248	130,294	40,831	562,208
Large-Scale	15	63	97	170	216	302	258	58	1,179
Total	2,221	38,785	97,077	89,218	102,550	130,552	130,552	40,439	563,387

Sources: Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu [Headquarters of ROKFV], *Wŏllamjŏn chonghap yŏn'gu* [Comprehensive Research on the Vietnam War] (Saigon: Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu, 1974), 391.

Did General Lee actually change the ROKFV's conduct of the Vietnam War during this period? Lee's objectives, in fact, were not to shift ROKFV's traditional conduct of the Vietnam War which had been focusing on the pacification of their tactical area of responsibility using both combat and civil affairs operations based on their company-sized bases. In an interview with the *Kyunghyang Shinmun* immediately preceding his departure from South Korea to Vietnam, Lee was asked whether or not he would revise the ROKFV's conduct of the war, as the U.S. forces have changed their conduct for Vietnamization. Lee asserted he would not alter the Korean approach.<sup>14</sup> Even if he announced the new guidelines focusing on offensive operations, Lee still maintains pacification operations as the goal in an effort to "transfer the quality of military aid to civil [Vietnamese] authorities."<sup>15</sup> What Lee wanted to do was balance the combat and civil affairs operations, since he thought combat operations had been underestimated in ROKFV's conduct in the war. Unlike Chae, Lee believed increasing combat operations was essential in the pacification effort.

General Lee Se-ho stressed the importance of offensive combat operations while maintaining the ROKFV's same approach to the war. Even the former commander, General Chae Myung-shin, did not fix the ratio of the two operations and thought it could vary based on

<sup>14</sup> "Wŏllamjŏn maemusae alch'age [Wrapping up well the Vietnam War]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 25 April 1969.

<sup>15</sup> "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," 158-161.

the condition of the war. In Chae's report completed upon his return from Vietnam, he described ROKFV as more focused on an offensive combat operation between 1967 and 1968 compared to the previous period. The Korean troops were able to focus more on civil affairs operations in 1969 since they estimated that the main enemy target had been destroyed and assumed the remaining enemies were scattered in their TAOR.<sup>16</sup> According to the ROKFV report, the two ROKA division's TAOR in II CTZ was almost 100% pacified by 1969.<sup>17</sup> Thus, militarily, there was no practical need to conduct large-scale offensive combat operations in 1969. Even after Lee became a commander, the division and regimental level operations were actually decreasing amid growing large-scale operations in line with his emphasis on conducting large-scale operations.<sup>18</sup> In reality, only the battalion-level large-scale operations increased for the purpose of maintaining the momentum of the attack until 1971. Therefore, the increased number of large-scale operations after Lee became a commander was not necessarily a result of the need for military or enemy situation.

In his first letter to President Park on 27 June 1969, General Lee wrote:

In my opinion, the word of the armistice is unnecessary and cannot be accepted by the soldiers. I encouraged them to keep conducting offensive combat operations because I was convinced that word [of armistice] rather indirectly lessens the military spirit of soldiers. ... If we conduct a passive operation such as defending our tactical bases, we cannot avoid the damage from the enemy attack and there would be a greater possibility of various accidents by the ungirt soldiers who have been in a depressed condition for a while. Therefore, I have decided to fight with the motto of the first strike. "First strike," which attacks the enemy before they assemble to attack us and destroy them when they assemble, can only reduce our casualties, prevent accidents by building a fighting spirit and solidarity under the condition of change

<sup>16</sup> "Ch'odae chuwöl han'gukkun saryönggan kwigukpogo [The First ROKFV Commander Return Home Report]," HB02463.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Chuwölsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], "Chihwigwan hoeüirok [The Minute of the Commanders' Meeting]," 20 January 1969, HB01985; Baek Haeng-keol interview, *Chüngönül t'onghae pon pet'unam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 129; Kim Sun-hyön interview, Ibid., 139.

<sup>18</sup> This is based on statistics compiled by ROKFV on 31 January 1973. Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön'gu*, 391.

and tension, and strengthen the combat power by training through the real fight with the American support of modern maneuver and firepower.<sup>19</sup>

He justified conducting the offensive combat operation by raising the following reasons: “(1) to gain maximum benefits with minimum casualties, (2) to smash enemy base in advance, and (3) to increase ROK soldiers’ capabilities for the real operation.”<sup>20</sup> General Lee was convinced, conducting more offensive combat operations would be the key to achieving South Korea’s national goals and interest in the Vietnamization phase of the war.

Since Vietnamization implied no hope of winning the war, General Lee’s guideline had purposes other than solely increasing the number of combat military operations. He claimed his objectives did not go against ROKFV’s previous conduct in the war but instead confronted the attitude and mentality of his soldiers. Lee “thought that we [were] fighting here as a contract, and this is why it became common practice for the Korean soldiers to evade the enemy. ... Soldiers should fight even if there would be a sacrifice... a person who retreats is a coward.”<sup>21</sup> Lee claimed that ROKFV had not been bold in previous years and soldiers became complacent.<sup>22</sup> He regarded General Chae’s policy to protect one civilian even if losing a hundred Viet Cong, as an impetus for soldiers to justify being passive in the combat operations.<sup>23</sup> Lee thought ROKFV lost its fighting spirit and he wanted his soldiers to be more active in fighting with the enemy.

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<sup>19</sup> “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 63.

<sup>20</sup> “Migun ch’ölsu kukkunün yŏnghyangöpta [The U.S. forces’ Withdrawal Does not Impact ROK Forces in Vietnam],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 3 July 1969.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Sun-hyŏn interview, *Chŭngŏnül t’onghae pon pet ’unam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 137-138.

<sup>22</sup> “Sŏnjegonggyöküro p’yŏngjŏngjuryŏk [Focusing on Pacification by First Attack],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 3 July 1969.

<sup>23</sup> Kim Hyung-suk, *Sŏktoŭi t’uhon* [Fighting Spirit of Seokdo] (Seoul: Jisikgonggam, 2016), 160-162. Some of the officers had already argued that this operational policy was unrealistic because if friendly forces should risk sacrifice to protect civilians, this policy often became a poison for soldiers. Lt. Kim Hyung-suk, dispatched in Vietnam between 1966 and 1968, argued that this policy should have been accepted as a political slogan not as a real operational policy. However, since it actually became an operational policy, it became a big limitation for combat troops.

Fundamentally, General Lee's objectives were mainly aimed at preventing further decline in morale and motivation amongst ROKFV troops during Vietnamization. He became a commander while South Korea was in the midst of losing its will to fight in Vietnam. General Lee recognized that the war had turned a corner. Right before he became a commander, Lee declared the main point of his policy was "to wrap up the Korean participation in the final stage of the Vietnam War."<sup>24</sup> He knew that the decision for Korean soldiers to stay or withdraw from South Vietnam would eventually be made by the South Korean government. President Park Jung-hee gave an order to Lee on 28 June 1969 maintaining Korean "forces should be resolute for completing missions until the government creates a policy after the U.S. motive is clarified."<sup>25</sup> In turn, Lee related to his subordinate commanders, "preparation for the armistice is the issue above the division level. Every commander under the regimental level should solely focus on combat operations, remembering that the best method of active defense is an attack."<sup>26</sup> As a field commander in Vietnam, Lee had to keep pursuing action until Seoul made a final decision to end their participation.

However, wrapping up their participation was not a simple task mainly because the war no longer had a possibility for victory. Also, the waning national motivation of South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War dwindled and negatively affected the morale of its forces in South Vietnam. The Vietnamization period lasted longer than ROKFV originally estimated in the 1968 special study. Seoul wanted their forces to stay in Vietnam without any promise of withdrawal, even after Washington announced their decision to withdraw forces and the U.S. ground forces actually began withdrawal in the middle of 1969. In the letter to Lee on 30 January

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<sup>24</sup> "Wöllamjõn maemusae alch'age, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*.

<sup>25</sup> "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 158-161.

1970, President Park wrote, “I cannot decide to withdraw our troops right now, but I am always ready to make that decision when we are no longer needed in South Vietnam... I hope our troops will maintain a good reputation until they are back in Korea.”<sup>27</sup> After ROKFV decided to prepare for a long-term dispatch with no political decision to withdraw, Lee had to refresh the Korean troops’ motivation and will, preventing further decline of morale and military discipline.<sup>28</sup> In addition to emphasizing a strong fighting spirit while conducting offensive combat operations, he started to highlight “strengthening mental armament and maintaining military discipline,” during his second quarterly senior commanders’ meeting on 25 September 1969.<sup>29</sup>

General Lee’s emphasis also played a role in the diplomatic and political arenas. In July 1969, Lee said that the U.S. withdrawal would not affect the condition of ROKFV and emphasized he would pursue the active and offensive military operations in an effort to kill the enemy and offer a better political solution.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, he vowed “no truce for us” policy until peace is restored. Lee said, “both South Vietnam and South Korea are heading toward the same direction and have the same common enemy, the communists. I believe that without the achievement of peace in South Vietnam we can never expect peace in South Korea or the security of Asian nations.”<sup>31</sup> It was mainly a response to the U.S. and South Vietnam’s criticism of ROKFV’s passiveness. The U.S. and South Vietnamese forces continued to criticize ROKFV throughout the Vietnamization phase. For example, in a 1969 memorandum to MACV commander General Creighton Abrams, Lt. Gen. Charles A. Corcoran, the I Field Force

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>28</sup> “Han'gukkunūn ohiryō changgijudun chunbi [The South Korean Forces are Rather Planning to Long-Term Stay in Vietnam],” *Maeil Business Newspaper*, 6 August 1969.

<sup>29</sup> “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 159-160.

<sup>30</sup> “Migun ch'ōlsu kukkunūn yōnghyangōpta,” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*; “Sōnjegonggyōkūro p'yōngjōngjuryōk,” *Dong-a Ilbo*.

<sup>31</sup> Vietnam Feature Service, “Asian Military Contributions...Allies in Vietnam Vietnam,” Folder 329, Box 9, Vietnam Archive Collection, VNCA.

commander, described Korean's inactivity where "division commanders are forbidden to launch operations greater than battalion-size or to attempt any deep objectives which would risk high casualties."<sup>32</sup> In actuality, ROKFV thought that it was the U.S. forces who became defensive and passive during Vietnamization.<sup>33</sup> ROKFV intended to give the impression that they were more active in the Vietnamization phase. In fact, the U.S.'s criticism of the Koreans during this period was mainly because of the U.S. and South Vietnam's demand for ROKFV's expanding its territory and role to fill the vacuum caused by the U.S. forces' withdrawal. ROKFV used their emphasis on the active offensive combat operation as a good cause to refuse the request. In addition to appealing the insufficient support from the U.S., ROKFV was able to make a good excuse from its "one hundred percent pacified" TAOR by "offensive combat operations," to justify their refusal to expand the role and territory.

In conclusion, General Lee's stronger military stance was his attempt to respond to Vietnamization. It is generally said Lee was more like a typical field commander who simply followed the government objectives, focusing solely on combat operations. On the other hand, General Chae was more like a general who recognized the political implications and nuances of the war and was more flexible. At the least, both leaders strived to prioritize South Korea's national interests. Different conditions for the leaders resulted in varied approaches, even though they both maintained the goals of the ROKFV. While Chae was the first commander in South Korean's participation in the Vietnam War, Lee also faced harsh conditions with Vietnamization during his tenure. Lee had to pay more attention to the morale and discipline of his soldiers but

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<sup>32</sup> Message from LTG Corcoran to Gen. Abrams, 22 September 1969, Folder 16, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>33</sup> "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," 71.

as the conflict lasted longer and longer, his objectives became more like a political slogan rather than an effective one.

### **Economic Benefits as the Main Motivation: The Decline of Korean Soldiers' Motivation**

Military power consists of both tangible and intangible elements of combat power. It is hard to describe intangible combat power with a single term, but foremost it is a human element of war, such as morale, motivation, will to fight, fighting spirit, passion, discipline, and unit cohesion. Those aspects not only play a critical role in battle but also in the overall conduct of the war, as Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz argues, “the moral elements are among the most important in war.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is always a matter of concern for the military to raise and maintain the combat troops' intangible power. However, since soldiers belong to a certain group such as the nation-state, it is inevitable that their intangible power is influenced by the national will to fight. Clausewitz explained the link between armed forces and people in his concept of “trinity of war”—armed forces, government, and people are the three essential elements for conducting a war—and thus the conduct of war becomes difficult if one of those aspects is insufficient.<sup>35</sup>

The U.S. forces experienced a decline in combat power because of a decline in motivation and morale over the course of the Vietnam War. At the beginning of the conflict, the soldiers' morale was high with the primary motivator; they were defending the U.S. by stopping the spread of communism in Asia. However, the U.S. forces' intangible power gradually

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<sup>34</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 184.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

declined as the war continued. The troops fought in harsh conditions amidst jungle terrain, tropical rain, booby traps, and unexpected enemy ambushes. Moreover, soldiers perpetually felt nervous as they struggled to distinguish between enemy combatants and civilians because the guerrilla warfare attacks occurred at unpredictable intervals. Even when they engaged the North Vietnamese main forces, it was forbidden to pursue and attack them outside the borderline. Despite these harsh conditions, U.S. forces maintained military cohesion and they still proved military effectiveness in numerous battles.

The decline of morale in U.S. forces was more related to the decreasing national support for the war. Overall Americans eventually lost the will to fight. At first, it was a defensive war of attrition.<sup>36</sup> The war became like “pouring water in a sieve” because, despite utilization of enormous resources, the war seemed endless. The Vietnam War was extremely complex, as a consequence, it was difficult to explain to the public. It was difficult to evaluate the progress of the war since the U.S. and its allied forces did repetitive search and destroy operations in addition to pacification in their occupied territory without any movement of the front line.<sup>37</sup> After the Tet Offensive and My Lai Massacre, many Americans realized they were losing an ugly and unjust war. The resulting government policy and strategy of “Vietnamization” to disengage from the Vietnam War resulted in the rapid decline of the U.S. forces’ combat motivation and morale. The policy contributed to the loss of morale and discipline among troops, which in turn resulted in drug and alcohol addiction, racial conflict, and fragging.<sup>38</sup> The U.S.

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis, *The American Culture of War*, 226.

<sup>37</sup> For details see: Thomas Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> “Army is Shaken by Crisis in Morale and Discipline,” *New York Times*, 5 September 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/09/05/archives/army-is-shaken-by-crisis-in-morale-and-discipline-army-is-shaken-by.html> (accessed 18 December 2018). For more details see: Richard Gabriel, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Howard Jones, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

troops began withdrawal in 1969 and were completely gone by early 1973. It was truly a memorable moment when the most powerful country in the world was defeated by one of the weakest nations.

Like the U.S., the South Korean forces in Vietnam experienced a similar decline, but as a result of a different set of circumstances. First, South Korea was more like a totalitarian state. It was President Park Chung-hee's ideas and decisions that primarily impacted South Korea's conduct in the Vietnam War. At the same time, Park paid attention to public opinion, especially before becoming a president for life by reforming the constitutional law in October 1972. Second, South Koreans were generally supportive of their participation in the war especially since the government insinuated Vietnam was a second front against Communists. The argument was generally convincing since South Koreans were strongly influenced by the ideology of anti-Communism. They also faced the real and visible threat from the North. Koreans were enthusiastic about their historical dispatch. Although their enthusiasm waned in the late period of the war, at least there was no anti-war movement while Koreans fought in Vietnam. Third, economic benefits were one of the major motives for South Korea's participation in the war. In fact, the country benefitted from substantial economic growth as a result of their involvement in the Vietnam Conflict. Even individual Korean soldiers gained economic benefits and were a primary incentive for their participation. Last, to strengthen the alliance with the U.S. was important for South Korea for its national security and economic growth. However, the relationship between the two countries was sometimes more like a tightrope between sovereignty and dependency. South Korea was eager to gain maximum interest from the U.S. by cooperating with them in the war. The Korean forces also tried to have a degree of autonomy while depending on the U.S. forces overall support for their conduct of the war.

The 9th Company commander of the Tiger 1st Regiment (1965-1966), Capt. Yong Yǒng-il, articulated the first group of Korean soldiers' motivation for their participation:

The primary reason to fight was patriotism, but soldiers also considered going to Vietnam because it was profitable for them. Soldiers who decided to volunteer said that they would go to foreign countries. In South Korea, supplies were poor, and they had a harsh life in the military. If they went to Vietnam, it would be mentally more comfortable, and there would be a greater opportunity to earn money. When I asked the soldiers, they told me that as a young man they would try going to a foreign country rather than eventually dying in such a small land.<sup>39</sup>

The motivation for the officer corps was not unlike the soldiers' drive to fight. Lt. Kim Hyung-suk, a platoon leader in the White Horse Division (1966-1967), considered his participation a noble cause. He had combat experience as a professional soldier and believed protecting South Vietnam was defending his country. Kim also wanted to contribute to the international peace endeavor in an effort to pay back those who helped his country during the Korean War. He felt his service contributed to the development of his country by providing South Korea with national security and supporting the economic stimulation from the U.S. At the same time, Kim's personal interest was also a motivating factor in his decision to volunteer for the war. His monthly combat duty pay (\$120/m), about four to five times more than his regular pay in South Korea (\$34), greatly contributed to the financial needs of his family.<sup>40</sup> Kim also strived to broaden his experience by contacting foreign troops, improving his foreign language skills, and expanding his worldview by experiencing another country. He had pride as a professional soldier and gaining confidence in combat.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Yong Yǒng-il interview, 26 October 1966, *Chǔngǒnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chǒnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 199.

<sup>40</sup> Choi Yong-ho, *Han'gwǒnŭro ingnŭn pet'ŭnamjǒnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [The Vietnam War and the ROK forces] (Seoul: Kukpangbu Kunsap'yǒnch'anyǒn'guso [The Institute for Military History], 2004), 423-424.

<sup>41</sup> Kim Hyung-suk, *Sǒktoŭi t'uhon* [Fighting Spirit of Seokdo] (Seoul: Jisikgonggam, 2016), 90-91.

According to studies, three main motives drove Korean soldiers' participation: (1) to gain economic benefits, (2) to achieve manhood and masculinity, and (3) patriotism and national loyalty. Although the Korean soldiers' motives varied between individuals from different ranks, class, education, and hometown, their motives were primarily either to fight for a noble cause or personal interest, and often a combination of both. Patriotism and loyalty to the country was a noble reason to join the war effort. The economic benefits for soldiers and career advancement opportunities for officers were large personal draws. The economic incentives were the main practical motive for most of the soldiers and, in many cases, often related to the realization of manhood. Soldiers who went to Vietnam could earn more than twenty-three times the amount of those who served in the ROK Army in South Korea.<sup>42</sup> Since most families in South Korea were poverty-stricken at that time, soldiers often volunteered to go to Vietnam to earn more money to support their families.<sup>43</sup> They believed sacrificing their lives for their family was their responsibility as an adult man and represented true manhood. South Koreans' enthusiasm for their historical participation was a strong motivator for soldiers, enabling them to feel they were representing their nation. Moreover, anti-communism which was strongly inherent in the South Koreans because of their experience in the Korean War and the afterward policy and education enabled them to empathize with the government's slogan that Vietnam was the second front of Korea. Lt. Kim remarked on the feeling when his troop attended a ceremony and participated in a parade in Seoul before leaving for Vietnam:

On 1 October 1966, a farewell ceremony of *White Horse* Division was held at Yeouido airport and President Park along with three key figures of the government

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<sup>42</sup> The monthly salary of a Private was \$ 1.60 in 1966. The daily U.S.-paid overseas allowance for service in Vietnam was \$1.25, the monthly total was \$37.50. The following is the daily overseas allowances for soldiers: \$1.25 for Private; \$1.35 for Private 1st Class; \$1.50 for Corporal; \$1.80 for Sergeant. Frank Baldwin, "The American Utilization of South Korean Troops in Vietnam," 10-11, Folder 17, Box 33, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

<sup>43</sup> <http://mpva.tistory.com/1095>. Corporal Park's case is representative; he testified that he was thinking his parents and his seven brothers and sisters could live a better life, funded by his participation."

hosted... A huge number of crowds, spanning age and gender, filled the streets, rooftops, and pedestrian bridges. The excitement from the soldiers in the parade with the gathering crowds transformed the Kwang Hwa-moon area into a fiery furnace and presented a magnificent spectacle. People glowed with enthusiasm, shouting “Warriors of White Horse, fight bravely, win, and return. Come back as a triumphal warrior!” It was the national enthusiasm itself. ... We should fight for our nation to death. ... We, as soldiers, resolved to win at any cost to meet the nation’s and peoples’ expectations.<sup>44</sup>

Individual soldiers could justify and cloak their personal motive within the noble cause of protecting their own nation against communist invasion. At least they had a good cause for sacrificing their lives in the war.

However, as described in the previous chapter, the South Korean government’s motivation and national fervor for the Vietnam War started to fade after 1968.<sup>45</sup> Seoul canceled the deployment of an additional combat division to South Vietnam after they experienced the “Tet Offensive in South Korea,” and the following disagreement with the U.S. over the appropriate response to North Korea’s military provocations. Although the two governments settled the disagreement, South Koreans felt betrayed by the U.S.’s unilateral and lukewarm reaction to North Korea’s military aggression. They began to have doubts about the U.S. security pledge to South Korea. South Korea’s motivation to participate in the Vietnam War in an effort to foster a strong alliance with the U.S. waned when they witnessed the ongoing armistice negotiations between the U.S. and North Vietnam as well as the U.S. forces’ gradual withdrawal from South Vietnam during the Vietnamization. Rumors of USFK’s withdrawal from South Korea based on the Nixon Doctrine and the actual withdrawal of the U.S. 7th Division in early

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<sup>44</sup> Kim, *Sŏktoŭi t’uhon*, 123-125.

<sup>45</sup> For more details, see Chapter 6.

1971 ultimately damaged the South Koreans' belief in the U.S.'s commitment to defend South Korea.

This chain of events undermined one of South Korea's main motivations and justifications for participating in the Vietnam War. The possibility of enhancing national security against North Korea by maintaining a strong alliance with the U.S. faded away. Since they lost their patriotic motive for the war, the economic benefit remained as their main incentive. As argued in the previous chapter, Seoul's main interest in the continued participation in the war during the Vietnamization period was to maintain its profits from the procurement of military goods, dispatch of labor, and contracts of construction and services. On the other hand, South Koreans' enthusiasm for their "historical dispatch" on the Vietnam War waned.<sup>46</sup> Instead of enthusiasm and patriotism toward the war, people came to be more interested in how much benefit their country and the deployed soldiers and laborers gained from the war instead of their combat troops' actual struggle in Vietnam. At the same time, the national controversy caused by the U.S. Senate and the mass media that the Korean soldiers in Vietnam as the U.S. mercenaries awakened a certain degree of skepticism on their fights in the Vietnam War. Hence, there is some truth to the argument that ROK soldiers were mercenaries. The South Korean morale and support for the Vietnam War suffered from this controversy.

By 1971, South Korea could no longer justify their participation in the war with the economic benefit alone. Moreover, it became evident that there would not be a victory in the war after Vietnamization started. South Korea's declining national cause and justification for the Vietnamization phase of the war inevitably influenced the soldiers' motivation. Personal interests

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<sup>46</sup> As argued in Chapter 2, Participation in Vietnam was South Korea's first dispatch abroad in its modern history. Moreover, people were proud of that because from the position of being helped, they were now helping other country.

came to play a relatively larger role in their inspiration to continue fighting. Gaining personal economic benefits and career advancements remained a chief incentive for soldiers as Seoul's main motive for retaining their troops was to continue reaping the economic benefits. It became increasingly difficult for individual soldiers to justify their participation without the same noble cause as before, even though the fact that they were risking their lives for the war remained unchanged. Moreover, as the Korean soldiers were embroiled in the mercenary controversy after the Symington hearings in 1970, it undermined the noble justification for their participation on the international stage, further damaging the Korean soldiers' morale.

### **A Hopeless War: The Deterioration of the ROK Troops' Morale and Discipline**

With regard to the Korean soldiers' motive in the Vietnamization phase, retired Brigade General Kyung-suk Park, a battalion commander between 1965 and 1966 in the Vietnam War, lamented:

After the middle phase of the war, Korean forces in Vietnam lost vitality, and the cause of their participation faded. The honor and pride of the first group of [Korean] combat troops had disappeared like a sunset. The conflict in picking dispatching members did not stop, and it was a lamentable period for soldiers who had previously regarded their participation with pride. Corruption and irregularities ran rampant in Korean forces in Vietnam.<sup>47</sup>

Park further claimed that soldiers, especially senior commanders and soldiers of noncombatant troops, were eager to go to Vietnam after they found out the war was relatively safe and a chance

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<sup>47</sup> Park Kyung-suk, "Pet'unamjōnjaengūi yangsangwa han'gukkun chakchōnūi kyohun [The Vietnam War and the lesson from the Korean forces' operation]," in *Pet'unamjōnjaeng yōn'gu ch'ongsō* [The Research of the Vietnam War], ed. Kukpangbu Kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso [The Institute for Military History], vol.1 (Seoul: Kukpangbu Kunsap'yōnch'anyōn'guso, 2002), 341.

to make money.<sup>48</sup> Park's argument has a potential bias from his own pride as he was a member of the first dispatched group and perhaps he underestimated the participation of soldiers and noncombat troop members who arrived after him. A study based on the U.S. I Field Force commanders' evaluation of ROKFV, conveyed a similar tone, specifically noting "as time went on the Korean soldiers sent to Vietnam were of lower quality than the 'cream of the crop' level of the entire Korean Army which first arrived."<sup>49</sup> The U.S. evaluation also reflected a political condition where they wanted to require a larger role from ROKFV. Despite the bias of Park's argument, when combined with the U.S. report, the two perspectives shed light on a larger situation facing the Korean forces' conditions during the Vietnamization phase.

In January 1970, Lt. Gen. Lee Se-ho, the ROKFV commander, issued "Three Creeds and Five Precepts" in conjunction with his declaration that the year would focus on "establishing a proper mental attitude."<sup>50</sup> The new "Three Creeds and Five Precepts" directives correlated to the Korean way of strengthening and maintaining soldiers' morale and discipline by indoctrinating them with mantras throughout everyday life. Soldiers should chant slogans in unison at every morning and evening call. The Three Creeds were: (1) we are brave and fearsome "Korean forces" to the enemy, (2) we are polite and kind "Dai-han [Korean]" to the Vietnamese, and (3) we are well disciplined and reliable "Koreans" to the Allied Forces.<sup>51</sup> The Five Precepts ordered soldiers not do the following: "(1) disobedience, (2) neglecting guard duties, (3) business activity

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<sup>48</sup> Park Kyung-suk, author's interview, 2 June 2018, Interviewee's home, Daejeon, South Korea.

<sup>49</sup> Stanley R. Larsen, *Vietnam Studies: Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975), 151.

<sup>50</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön'gu*, 66; "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," 193.

<sup>51</sup> Headquarters Republic of Korea Forces Vietnam, "Brief History," 25 September 1970, Folder 15, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA; Headquarters Republic of Korea Forces Vietnam, "Brief History," 25 September 1971, Folder 131, Box 39, Record of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Part 1, VNCA.

(black market), (4) crimes against civilians, and (5) false reports.”<sup>52</sup> Commander Lee’s new policy ironically revealed that those bad behaviors indeed had become an issue inside ROKFV. Lee admitted to punishing soldiers who committed unsuitable behaviors and emphasized the prevention of crime was more important than punishment.<sup>53</sup>

ROKFV acknowledged that the harmful effect of the distorted motivation hurt the morale and discipline of the troops. General Lee worried “If soldiers open an eye [to participate] in the business activity, it would cause harm and hurt the discipline of the entire army.”<sup>54</sup> Lee created the “Five Precepts” in an effort to prevent crimes and vowed to strictly punish violators regardless of rank.<sup>55</sup> External criticism against Korean troop behavior caused turmoil within the ROKFV. In December 1969, the activities of the Korean forces were portrayed in *The Washington Post* as illegal efforts to trade goods from the American PX on the black market.<sup>56</sup> General Lee wrote to President Park and denied the accusation “as an irresponsible claim of an exaggeration and a wrong assumption based on one Australian show girl’s interview.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, a significant number of American newspapers accused Korean troops of killing and committing atrocities against South Vietnamese civilians based on the series of RAND reports.<sup>58</sup> ROKFV denied the claim to the South Vietnamese public, asserting they “did not commit a

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<sup>52</sup> *Wöllamjŏn chonghap yŏn ’gu*, 60-68; “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 184-196.

<sup>53</sup> *Wöllamjŏn chonghap yŏn ’gu*, 67.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> “Koreans Use PX to Stock Marketeers,” *Washington Post*, 17 December 1969.

<sup>57</sup> “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 83.

<sup>58</sup> “Viet Killings Before ’67 Laid to Korean Marines,” *Washington Post*, 10 January 1970; “New Data Accuse Korean Soldiers,” *New York Times*, 11 January 1970; Murrey Marder, “S. Koreans Linked to Viet Terror,” *Washington Post*, 11 January 1970; J.D. Alexander, “Brutal Korean Policy In Vietnam Doubted,” *Washington Post*, 12 January 1970; James P. Sterba, “Student Says Refugees Told of Korean Slayings,” *New York Times*, 17 January 1970. For more details, see Chapter 5.

massacre,” and “from the first stage of the Republic of Korea’s commitment in Vietnam, the main combat efforts [of South Korea] stressed separating enemy and friendly civilians.”<sup>59</sup> In his letter to President Park, Lee said, “I am sorry to have caused you so much anxiety because of these dishonorable articles from some foreign media... According to my investigation, there was no evidence” of this accusation.<sup>60</sup> ROKFV regarded the allegation as an enemy’s slander and mudslinging towards the Korean troops in Vietnam.<sup>61</sup> Washington also concluded that “the allegations of ROK atrocities were made by a very small number of the total interviewed.”<sup>62</sup>

However, in addition to denying allegations, ROKFV needed to take action in response. When General Lee announced the new “Three Creeds and Five Precepts,” he later recalled the “rumors of last year disappeared due to the commander’s judgment and temperance.”<sup>63</sup> Lee aimed to minimize and eliminate illegal business activities among the soldiers, working towards the “normalization of military payment certificate (MPC), control of PX, and improvement of controlling assets and other treatment.”<sup>64</sup> On 5 November 1969, a U.S. report about the ROK Marine Brigade listed the black market as “one of our problem areas,” but also admitted the Koreans’ use of the black market was “to a much lesser degree than previously [noted], at least they are less open in their transactions.”<sup>65</sup> Apart from the specific actions to prevent bad behaviors, ROKFV worried about the collapse of a good evaluation for the Korean troops as “South Korean troops in the past often had been cited by U.S. officials and other allies as

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<sup>59</sup> “New Data Accuse Korean Soldiers,” *New York Times*.

<sup>60</sup> “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 81.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>62</sup> Memorandum from Warren Nutter to Under Secretary of State, “Rand Memorandum Concerning Allegations of Korean Atrocities,” 23 December 1969, Folder 16, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>63</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Memorandum from Warren Parker to Assistant Deputy for CORDS, “Current Evaluation of 2d Republic of Korea Marine Brigade,” 5 November 1969, Folder 16, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

‘models of effectiveness’ in ‘pacifying’ areas under their control. Recent reports, however, alleged that the success is achieved by ‘terrifying everyone,’ Vietcong and non-Vietcong alike.”<sup>66</sup> To combat and respond to external criticism, General Lee’s new “Three Creeds and Five Precepts” policy intended to portray ROKFV as well-disciplined troops.

Fundamentally, ROKFV acknowledged the declining morale and military discipline as a result of their distorted motives and the end of the war atmosphere due to Vietnamization. As explained early in this chapter, Lee emphasized the fighting spirit and pushed to conduct offensive combat operations in an effort to renew the Korean troops’ will to fight and prevent the decline of morale and discipline. He felt ROKFV needed a different way to prevent the decline of morale and discipline. In his letter to President Park on 1 January 1979, Lee explained, “Compared to any period we have faced before, now is the time to establish the discipline and arm the military with spirit for the solid unity.”<sup>67</sup> When he announced “Three Creeds and Five Precepts,” Lee articulated the policy aimed “to reduce the influence and side effect of the impending armistice and withdrawal,” and “to achieve an honorable withdrawal responding to variable conditions surrounding the Vietnam War.”<sup>68</sup>

However, ROKFV’s inherent problems did not disappear easily with the use of certain slogans and penalties because they were already deeply entrenched within the toxic conditions of the Vietnam War. Lt. Col. Han Kyoo-won, 1st Battalion Commander of the Tiger Cavalry Regiment, suggested one of the problems in ROKFV’s report about their participation, “I will write this down because there are few evil effects related with greed which are more related with

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<sup>66</sup> “S. Koreans Linked to Viet Terror,” *Washington Post*.

<sup>67</sup> “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 79.

<sup>68</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 60.

soldiers' spirit rather than the unique condition of Vietnam."<sup>69</sup> Economic benefits were a major motive for soldiers during Vietnamization and they eventually had harmful effects. ROKFV's study on leadership regarded soldiers' desire to gain to be one of the elements that made the discipline of the troops difficult.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the military understood this motivation came from the unique conditions in the Vietnam War, stating "in many cases, soldiers [were] blinded by greed because they received an overseas allowance and there was an abundance of materials and supplies there."<sup>71</sup> When Lt. Col. Han returned home in 1972, he addressed this situation in his culminating report.

[The Korean troops] wallowed in the concept of the box. The attitude of individual soldiers was more oriented on their personal benefits which were opposed to the cause and purpose of our participation in this war. Soldiers complained about inconsistent benefits of the homecoming box which had different standards based on the overseas allowances. Therefore, although "homecoming box" might contribute to the welfare and morale of soldiers, it had more harm to soldiers by giving them a mental burden. It is not effective.<sup>72</sup>

During the Vietnam War, Korean soldiers could take a "homecoming box" when they returned to South Korea after their tour (see Figure 16 and 17). Two boxes of the largest (A) and medium (B) were allocated to high-ranking officers, one A box for a low-ranking officer, one (B) box for NCOs, one smallest (C) box for soldiers. Korean soldiers put items to the box, such as C-rations, electronic items (television, radio, recorder, camera, iron, refrigerator), cigarettes, coffee, milk, souvenirs, etc. The boxes provided potential means for corruption.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 81, 98.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 100.



Figure 16. Homecoming Box. Photo courtesy of Sergeant Lee's Vietnam War and Remaining Stories.<sup>73</sup>

Some officers and NCOs could send multiple boxes to South Korea by purchasing unused boxes from soldiers. It was difficult for combat soldiers to fill their boxes with valuable items because of their low income. Some soldiers transported empty shells in the boxes by hiding them in the double bottoms of the container. Although empty shells were not authorized material, they were profitable. Every box was censored by an inspector before being sent to South Korea (see Figure 17). Corrupt inspectors often usurped the effectiveness of the censorship process. Censorship emerged because of the mutual distrust, and some censors profited from the process. When Lt. Col. Lee Jae-tae, S-3 (Operations) officer of the 1st Regiment of the Capital Division, heard the news that ten ROKA personnel flew from Na Trang to Qui Nonh to execute box censorship but died when the helicopter went down on December 1971, he called this accident as “shameful disaster.”<sup>74</sup>

<sup>73</sup> <http://vietnamwarstory.tistory.com/24>.

<sup>74</sup> Lee Jae-tae, *Kasŭmŭl ttulk'o kan chŏkt'an, Kunbokŭn pukke p'iro multŭlgo* [Enemy Bullet Pierced the Chest, the Uniform was Blood-drenched] (Seoul: Chŏnt'ongjokpo munhwasa, 2014), 409-410.



Figure 17. Inspection of Homecoming Box. Photo courtesy of Sergeant Lee's Vietnam War and Remaining Stories<sup>75</sup>

The box system fueled the Koreans' black-market activity. Soldiers often filled their boxes with items purchased on the black market that would yield higher revenue than legally obtained or more easily accessible materials. The U.S. MACV's document outlined the practice.

Korean participation in the Black Market has inimical effects on the anti-corruption, resource control and economic rebuilding programs of the South Vietnamese economy. Reports through various US channels (Embassy, CID, Provost Marshall, COORDS) indicate that Korean officers, enlisted men and entire units are involved illicit marketing of contraband. One observer reported that Korean black-market activities are so gross and so-well organized that personally involved or condone such acts. Illicit transactions include exchange of Military Payment Certificates (MPC) and US dollars; traffic involving C-rations, pharmaceuticals, surgical instruments, liquor, electronic equipment, PX supplies as well as concertina wire and sandbags. It was also reported that the Koreans "pad" their troops lists to collect the daily US supported ration of \$2.51 per man and supplemental 800 gram Vietnamese rice ration.<sup>76</sup>

MPC was the legal method for Korean soldiers to buy items at American post exchange (PX), but they were also used in the South Vietnamese black market and in general sales outlets.

<sup>75</sup> <http://vietnamwarstory.tistory.com/24> (accessed 28 December 2018).

<sup>76</sup> Memorandum for Deputy Secretary of Defense, "Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROKFB)," 12 August 1969, Box 12, CORDS Historical Working Group Files 1967-1973, RG 472, NARA II.

Because of fake MPC and their prevalence on the black market, the U.S. forces changed MPC twice between 1969 and 1971. The changes caused a diplomatic conflict between MACV and ROKFV.<sup>77</sup> To relieve soldiers' complaints, ROKFV issued coupons for use in the market in lieu of MPC.<sup>78</sup> Even with the coupons, buying expensive items in the PX was difficult for normal soldiers because of their low income. As a result, the black market became the main source for the Korean soldiers to earn profits.

Harmful effects caused by greed resulted in inequality and distrust among the Korean troops. Lt. Kim Hyung-suk described the situation in a report after he came back from Vietnam:

I haven't heard any further stories of soldiers who conducted business with their boxes after they returned home. However, there was a rumor that electronics from South Vietnam flourished in the markets of big cities in South Korea. People felt electronic goods made their lives better and contributed to the economic growth of the country. In contrast, there were people who took the items, breaking the rules. That was the expression of the sense of shame, people who followed the rules and regulations suffered a loss, while people who violated the regulations sold the contraband, had a good life, and won praise. This resulted in a greater sense of deprivation.<sup>79</sup>

Combat commanders credited greed associated with the boxes as having negative effects on real combat operations. The Tiger 26th Regimental commander, Col. Woo Jong-lim, identified soldier greed as a lesson to be learned from the Vietnam War because "soldiers lost the true military spirit because of the desire of [monetary] gain" from the boxes.<sup>80</sup> After the failure of Operation Tiger 16—a search and destroy operation between 19 April and 14 May 1971—the

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<sup>77</sup> Lee, *Han'gillo sŏngyŏttŏn nae choguk*, 437.

<sup>78</sup> "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," 85, 193.

<sup>79</sup> Kim, *Sŏktoŭi t'uhon*, 238.

<sup>80</sup> Woo Jong-lim interview, 22 and 23 April 1975, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 646.

3rd Battalion commander of Tiger Cavalry Regiment, Lt. Col. Kang Hyun-joong testified the soldiers' distrust of the regimental commander was a result of his greed.

The commander's greed negatively impacted his ability to complete military operations as it resulted in a sense of distrust among his soldiers. Col. Kang Hyun-joong claimed, "many officers were more interested in the desire to gain rather than conducting the military operation."<sup>81</sup> Supporting this notion, the 6th Company commander of Tiger Cavalry Regiment, Capt. Jang Se-kwon, said, "based on my view, every regimental and battalion commander was filled with greed for money, honor, achievement, and selfishness."<sup>82</sup> Jang, at the same time, blamed his 2d Platoon leader's mental attitude as he was "involved in collecting empty cartridges by saying he came to Vietnam to earn money, not to be killed."<sup>83</sup> According to Jang, the 2d Platoon leader's mindset caused a number of casualties in enemies' ambush during the operation. Meanwhile, lower and midlevel commanders often criticized the greed of their high commanders. The 9th Company of the Tiger 26th Regimental commander, Capt. Choi Sŏng-bu, criticized the high commanders for their collective greed.<sup>84</sup> 1st Lt. Jin Moo-woong, 3d Platoon leader of the 6th Company, Tiger Cavalry Regiment, also pointed about some senior commander's greed was problematic even though ROKFV could gain the experience for small unit combat, as a lesson of the Vietnam War.<sup>85</sup> As a result, in his diary on 3 December 1971, Lt. Col. Lee Jae-tae wrote, "Let's withdraw as soon as possible in order not to become Korean

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<sup>81</sup> Kang Hyun-joong interview, 14 February 1983, Ibid., 743-745.

<sup>82</sup> Jang Se-kwon interview, 23 November 1982, Ibid., 734-736.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Choi Sŏng-bu interview, 2 December 1982, Ibid., 712.

<sup>85</sup> Kim Moo-woong interview, 27 November 1982, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 739.

forces who only know money and are crazy for it... Let's become an original Korean military who used to be pure."<sup>86</sup>

False reporting became rampant when officers' motives derived from personal interest and careerism. Commanders tended to exaggerate the effectiveness of operations in reports substantiated by evidence obtained from the black market rather than in legal operations. Instead of a body counts used by the U.S. Army, ROKFV had accepted the capture of enemy weapons as a measure of operational success. The black market, often, was used to purchase enemy weapons, so commanders could substantiate a false report. After ROKFV began to strongly regulate the operation reports in 1970, their report was often supplemented by cutting enemies' ears to prove their success. This practice caused "the most nettlesome issue in the Koreans' participation of the Vietnam War."<sup>87</sup> On 7 November 1970, three South Vietnamese civilians were killed by the order of the platoon leader and the platoon falsely reported them as Viet Cong, but since one man whose ear was cut still survived, the incident was discovered. *The Monthly Chosun* later argued that this incident showed the dark side of the South Korean forces' Vietnam War.<sup>88</sup> About this incident, President Park wrote a letter to General Lee:

I've already received the report from the joint chief of staff about Korean forces' massacres in South Vietnam these days. The incident of killing a girl was unfortunate but was inevitable for the operations. However, I think all levels of commanders and soldiers should be educated not to repeat the massacre committed by the White Horse 29th Regiment. I can't help but feel devastated that inhumane atrocities like killing civilians and cutting their ears in order to produce a false report, minimized our forces' achievement in the war.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Lee, *Kasūmūl ttulk'o kan chōkt'an, Kunbokūn pukke p'iro multūlgo do*, 410.

<sup>87</sup> "Wōllamin haksalsagōn [Massacre of South Vietnamese]," in *Wōlganjosōn* [The Monthly Chosun], April 1992.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," 37-38.

General Lee apologized for the situation and promised to punish everyone involved in this incident.<sup>90</sup> In his diary on 19 September 1971, Lt Col. Lee Jae-tae wrote, “It is said that false reports were far from uncommon. As a result, atrocities such as cutting ears from the enemy body were committed for a while, but now it has been forbidden. It is a sad story.”<sup>91</sup> In addition to this, he lamented the distrust of the combat reports, “Confirmation of military gains! It is the first time. I can’t understand. Why? Why we don’t trust each other? It is an unpleasant thing for combat troops to receive confirmation.”<sup>92</sup>

In addition to frequent false reporting associated with weapons, officers tended to the troop casualties largely due to the policy designed to reduce casualties on friendly forces. Brig. Gen. Oh Yun-yŏng, Deputy commander of the Capital Division from June 1970 to June 1971, indicated false reporting occurred to avoid penalties as officers “had a tendency to report casualties dividing dates and reported WIA if soldiers were killed in the evacuation or hospital.”<sup>93</sup> He believed the problem should be rectified; however, the eradicating the false reports was not easy. Maj. Gen. Kim Young-sun, the 9th Division Commander, felt betrayed when he first received a false report and fabricated achievements in November 1971. Occurring only a few days after he became a commander, he was ashamed and “decided to solve the problems one by one from now on.”<sup>94</sup> At the commanders’ meeting on 18 January 1972, Kim emphasized tightening the military discipline by eradicating the false reports and disobedience.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 101.

<sup>91</sup> Lee, *Kasimul tulk’o kan chŏkt’an, Kunbokun pukke p’iro multulgo do*, 371.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 370-371.

<sup>93</sup> Oh Yun-yŏng interview, 17 February 1983, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 717.

<sup>94</sup> Kim Young-sun, *Paengmagojiŭi kwangyŏng* [Glory of the White Horse Hill] (Seoul: P’albogwŏn, 1997), 219.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

Both the distorted motivation for the war and the rapidly changing conditions in the war strongly influenced ROKFV's morale. The war in Vietnam entered a lull in the Vietnamization period. ROKFV became more passive as the Vietnamization proceeded and their withdrawal from Vietnam loomed closer. Despite Lee's emphasis on the aggressiveness, ROKFV was unable to be as aggressive due to the fundamental condition of Vietnamization. Brig. Gen. Oh described the situation in an interview:

Since 1969, the U.S. started to withdraw its troops from Vietnam based on the Nixon Doctrine. Therefore, it was the period of every country's forces avoiding decisive battles. Korean forces focused on self-defense [of our own area of responsibility] because we did not want to conduct combat operations that sacrifice soldiers' lives. [After Vietnamization started,] the Vietnam War was no longer able to achieve a victory by military means.<sup>96</sup>

A steep drop in the number of allied soldiers killed in action (KIA) after 1969 showed the war situation during the Vietnamization (see Table 1). Compared to the U.S. and South Vietnam, the decline of South Koreans' KIA between 1969 and 1970 was not as noticeable due to Lee's emphasis on offensive operations.

Table 1. Allies' Number of KIA

Allies	Total	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972
South Vietnam	133,063	3,280	11,953	12,718	27,915	21,833	17,396	14,582	23,386
The U.S.	44,344	868	4,989	9,358	14,561	9,307	4,139	990	132
South Korea	3,796	36	502	834	663	505	498	378	380
Total	181,203	4,184	17,444	22,910	43,139	31,645	22,033	15,950	23,898

*Sources:* Chŏnp'yŏnwi [War History Compilation Committee], "Wŏllam ch'amjŏn t'onggye [The Statistics of the Dispatch in South Vietnam]," 1972. HB01620.

<sup>96</sup> Oh Yun-yŏng interview, *Chŏngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukun*, vol.1, 713-714.

On 9 April 1970, President Park ordered Commander Lee during a visit to Blue House, to reduce casualties and develop the “new strategy” to adapt to the current conditions of the war.<sup>97</sup> Seoul was under domestic political pressure to withdraw their forces from South Vietnam and the public’s perception of participation was important to maintain in order to retain troops in Vietnam. As a result, Seoul wanted to keep the number of soldiers’ casualties low while taking advantage of their participation. Seoul announced in early 1971 their phased withdrawal plan of forces. Following that plan, the ROK Marine Brigade completed its mission and withdrew from South Vietnam in late 1971. Leaving Vietnam became a matter of time for South Korean soldiers. After the negotiation with Washington and Saigon, Seoul decided to pull out its two army divisions, Tiger and White Horse, by early 1973. Since their withdrawal timeline had been decided, it became more difficult for ROKFV to be aggressive in their conduct. The reduction in U.S. support, as the U.S. ground troops were on the way of withdrawing from Vietnam, also effectively restricted ROKFV’s military operations.<sup>98</sup>

As Vietnamization progressed, ROKFV became more and more defensive, inactive, and passive in the conduct of their combat actions. The Korean troops in Vietnam began to seek more security in the Vietnamization. On 13 September 1970, a *New York Times* article revealed, “the Korean forces might soon assume a more defensive posture and concentrate more on shielding the population from enemy attacks than on seeking out the enemy.”<sup>99</sup> ROKFV added new “strengthening small-scale operations based on the system of area defense,” as per the 1971 operational policy.<sup>100</sup> On 5 May 1971, General Shim Hung-sun, the ROK Chairman of Joint

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<sup>97</sup> “Pak taet’ongnyōng, I saryōnggwanegē saeroun chōnsul kaebal chishi [President Park Ordered Commander Lee to Develop New Tactics],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 9 April 1970.

<sup>98</sup> For more details, see Chapter 8.

<sup>99</sup> “Koreans Weighing Shift in Role and Combat Tactics,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1970.

<sup>100</sup> Chuwōlsa [Headquarters of ROKFV], “Hullyōng [Directives] 71-1,” 2 December 1970, HB02156.

Chiefs of Staff, visited ROKFV and relayed Seoul's directive to gain a maximum outcome with the least number of casualties.<sup>101</sup> ROKFV would be more defensive considering its future withdrawal and started to conduct mainly defensive operations. Lt. Col. Jae-tae Lee wrote in his 18 October 1971 diary:

Recent [company] bases are built for permanent settlement. Bases are built on a large scale with substantial labor and materials with a barrier built by bulldozers over the course of weeks. Do we really have to do this? When we first came here [in 1965], bases were not for settlement. At that time, after we pacified the territory, we moved to pacify another territory. In my case, my company base moved 8 times in 12 months of my term as a company commander. ... Now, there is nowhere to pacify, bases are always in the same place.<sup>102</sup>

As a result of emphasizing the security, even company bases, which had been used as a foothold of ROK forces' pacification operation, were used primarily for defense.

As ROKFV became more passive and defensive, their morale and discipline quickly declined as well. This was the precise moment when Commander Lee's command policy emphasizing combat offensive operations became more of a political slogan rather than an effective strategy. Lee's emphasis was not able to turn the tide of the war. Rather, his initiative brought about negative side effects causing Korean forces to become increasingly more passive from lack of motivation. Lt. Col. Lee said, "there was an order to conduct battalion level operations from the division. It was based on ROKFV 長 commander's comment that we are too passive in the current state of a lull. I am deeply concerned about how the result comes out when the commander who conducts the operation is being pressured from the upper unit to minimize the casualties at the same time to maximize the result."<sup>103</sup> Some officers argued General Lee's

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<sup>101</sup> Lee, *Han'gillo sŏngyŏttŏn nae choguk*, 469.

<sup>102</sup> Lee, *Kasŭmŭl ttulk'o kan chŏkt'an, Kunbokŭn pukke p'iro multŭlgo*, 389.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

emphasis on combat offensive operations caused the false report by exaggerating their outcome. It became difficult to expect the fighting spirit to motivate them despite the ROKFV's actions to prevent the further decline of their soldiers' morale and discipline. In his diary on 4 September 1971, Lt. Col. Lee stipulated "withdrawal would be good considering the cause and the current situation... Let's go home as soon as possible."<sup>104</sup> On 9 September, he remarked, "We do not necessarily bleed in another's land."<sup>105</sup> South Koreans motivation for the war had already faded.

The Korean soldiers were no longer motivated to fight the war amidst the ongoing withdrawal of American troops' and their own looming extraction. The 1st Battalion of Tiger 26th Regiment, Lt. Col. Son Gap-ki felt "the combat motivation of our soldiers was passive due to Vietnamization."<sup>106</sup> Also, the 1st Company Commander Capt. Han Sung-koo admitted when he became a commander in July 1972 the morale of his soldiers was extremely low facing the impending withdrawal. He revealed, "some soldiers even complained about the hard training."<sup>107</sup> South Korean troops were losing their vitality without the hope of victory for the war. The end of the war atmosphere strengthened attitude of their self-preservation, raising the idea that their death would be meaningless. As the withdrawal approached, it became more difficult to expect sacrifices from Korean soldiers in the Vietnam War. The troops felt that nobody could give a justification behind why they were fighting.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 358-359.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 364.

<sup>106</sup> Son Gap-ki interview, 11 July 1984, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 769.

<sup>107</sup> Han Sung-koo interview, 12 July 1984, Ibid., 770.

## Chapter 8

### The Battle of An Khe Pass (1972): South Korea's Pyrrhic Victory in the Vietnamization of Phase of the Vietnam War

#### The Dilemma of ROKFV: Dynamics of the Three Forces' Relationship During Vietnamization

On 24 September 1972, after forty-seven days of construction, the magnificent Korean Victory Monument, which stands 6.3 meters high and weighs thirty-two tons, was erected at An Khe Pass, South Vietnam by the Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROKFV).<sup>1</sup> The following is an epitaph on the monument for the victory of the Battle of An Khe Pass:

This is a sanctuary for the Korean crusaders of liberty who through a bloody battle rose triumphantly and shall be permanently commemorated here for their efforts and dedication. In April 1972, when South Vietnam was in a precarious situation amidst the all-out offensive attack from the North Vietnamese Army, the Tiger Division of the Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam destroyed the core of the enemy's 12th Regiment of the 3d Division. They won an admirable victory that shall be remarkably remembered forever in the history of the Vietnam War. ... People of both Korea and Vietnam should not forget the tremendous sacrifices of numerous young Korean soldiers who gave their valuable lives to win the bloody battle at An Khe Pass. Today we erect this Victory Monument in the great name of the Tiger Division of ROKFV as a dedication to the war heroes who led the victorious operation.<sup>2</sup>

South Korea glorified this battle as a major achievement. However, when South Vietnam fell in 1975, this monument (Figure 18) was demolished. A smaller monument (Figure 19), erected immediately after the battle on Hill 638, remains but is abandoned. The memory of the South Koreans' triumph in the Battle of An Khe Pass has faded away.

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<sup>1</sup> "Victory Monument in An Khe Pass," in *Chuwŏl han'gukkun saryŏngbu* [ROKFV], *Daihan* [Republic of Korea] 126 (1 October 1972), HB02635.

<sup>2</sup> This is the translated description from the following memoir: Kim Yŏng-tu, *Ank'ep'aesŭ taehyŏlchŏn* [The Bloody Battle for An Khe Pass] (Seoul, Yesarang: 2011), 9-10.



Figure 18. The War Victory Monument at Anke Pass, 16 August 2006. Photo courtesy of *Vietvet Veterans of Korea*.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 19. Victory Monument of Tiger Division, 15 May 2017. Photo courtesy of Sergeant Lee's Vietnam War and Remaining Stories.<sup>4</sup>

The Battle of An Khe Pass took place from 11 to 26 April 1972 and was the bloodiest battle for Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War. Starting as a tiny skirmish, the battle developed into a contest for command of high ground. Koreans fought to capture a hill that the

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.vietvet.co.kr/technote/read.cgi?board=englishw&y\\_number=30&nnew=2](http://www.vietvet.co.kr/technote/read.cgi?board=englishw&y_number=30&nnew=2) (accessed 8 August 2018).

<sup>4</sup> <http://vietnamwarstory.tistory.com/797> (accessed 8 August 2018).

People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had fortified to interdict the main supply route of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) during North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive. After a bloody sixteen-day battle, the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) finally captured the hill, drove the PAVN from this area, and reopened the ARVN supply route. The battle resulted in enormous casualties. According to the official history of ROK forces' participation in the Vietnam War, a total of seventy-five soldiers were killed and 222 were wounded, yet this was arguably fewer than the actual number of casualties.<sup>5</sup>

The Battle of An Khe Pass has generally been regarded as a successful operation in South Korea. Lt. Gen. Lee Se-ho, the commander of ROKFV, noted the "battle proved to the world the Koreans' intrepidity and high-level of combat power."<sup>6</sup> When South Korean President Park Chung-hee invited several celebrated soldiers of the battle to the Blue House, he commented that the Battle of An Khe Pass was the most brilliant exploit in South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War. Keeping pace with the glorification by the Korean government and its military, the Korean media promoted this battle as "the most brilliant exploit after the dispatching of troops to Vietnam."<sup>7</sup> Even today the ROKA commemorates the battle as a representative case of the country's military spirit of never retreating from the battlefield. The statue of Im Dong-chun, recipient of South Korea's highest order of military merit *Taeguk* for his sacrifice as a platoon leader attacking an enemy bunker in this battle, stands at the ROKA Infantry School. In 2006, ROKA named its annual prize for best platoon leaders after "Dong-

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<sup>5</sup> Kukpangbu [The Ministry of Defense], *P'awöl han 'gukkun chönsa* [The War History of Korean Troops in Vietnam] (Seoul: Kukpangbu, 1985), vol.10, 220. However, according to their memoirs and testimonies, veterans who participated in this battle do not count on this number. After the battle, CNN reported that "Korean forces suffered more than twice as many killed and wounded as official reports show in the 16-day battle to reopen the An Khe Pass." "ROK Casualties," 28 April 1972, Folder 17, Box 33, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Se-ho, *Han'gillo sömgyöttön nae choguk* [The nation I served] (Seoul: Taeyangmido, 2009), 489.

<sup>7</sup> "Kukkun p'awöl irae kajang k'ün konghun [The Most Brilliant Exploit after the Dispatching of Troops in Vietnam]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 29 May 1972.

chun” to commemorate his distinguished military service, sacrifice, and courage, and to perpetuate the memory of the heroism in this battle.<sup>8</sup>

However, due to the glorification of the Battle of An Khe Pass, this battle has not been seriously analyzed either inside or outside of the ROK military. The Vietnam War has also become a “Forgotten War” in South Korea. Apart from the military’s perspective, this battle has been widely regarded as problematic. Most of the available veteran memoirs describe this battle as lamentable and controversial, although Korean soldiers fought bravely.<sup>9</sup> These narratives reflect criticisms of the battle’s high casualties before the final withdrawal. Lee Jae-tae, a retired general and veteran of the Vietnam War, argued that this particular battle had many problems and he urged the military authorities to re-examine whether the battle could truly be described as a success.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the current scholarship has been insufficient to ascertain why and how it was problematic and neglects to discover the real implications of this battle. Historian Wi T’ae-sŏn’s study was the first to examine the battle but limited his work to describing the progress of the battle and its tactical lessons. This study does not evaluate whether the battle was a success for the Korean forces.<sup>11</sup> In his book, *Trial by Fire*, about the Easter Offensive, historian Dale Andrade argues that ROKA’s operations in the An Khe Pass were problematic. Based on the

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<sup>8</sup> “Kŭdaedŭrŭn mobŏm sodaejang [You Guys Are True Platoon Leaders],” *Korea Defense Daily*, 25 April 2006, [http://kookbang.dema.mil.kr/newsWeb/20060425/1/BBSMSTR\\_000000010021/view.do](http://kookbang.dema.mil.kr/newsWeb/20060425/1/BBSMSTR_000000010021/view.do) (accessed 6 February 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Kim Ho-yŏn, “1972 Nyŏnŭi il [The Incident in 1972],” in *Tto tarŭn shijak* [A New Start], ed. Federation of Artistic & Cultural Organization of Korea (Chuncheon: Kangwon Ilbosa, 2000), 70-85; Kwŏn T’ae-jun, “Ank’ejŏnt’u ch’amjŏn sugi [Memoir about the Battle of An Khe],” in *Pet’ŭnamjŏnjaeng yŏn’gu ch’ongsŏ ch’ongsŏ* [The Research of the Vietnam War], ed. Kukpangbu Kunsap’yŏnch’anyŏn’guso [The Institute for Military History], 275-332 (Seoul: Kukpangbu Kunsap’yŏnch’anyŏn’guso, 2002); Hwang Jin-soon, “The An Khe Pass Battle,” 30 April 2006, <http://www.iwvpa.net/hwangjs/index.php> (accessed 3 August 2018); Kwŏn T’ae-jun, *Ankheui Nunmul* [Tears of An Khe] (Seoul: Mun Yech’ŏn, 2010); Kim, *Ankhepass Taehyuljeon*.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Jae-tae, *Kasŭmŭl ttulk’o kan chŏkt’an, Kunbokŭn pukke p’iro multŭlgo* [Enemy Bullet Pierced the Chest, the Uniform was Blood-drenched] (Seoul: Chŏnt’ongjokpo Munhwasa, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Wi T’ae-sŏn, “Ank’ep’aesŭjakchŏn’gwa kŭ kyohun [The Operation of An Khe Pass and its Lesson],” *Kunsa* [Military History] 12 (1986): 49-79.

primary sources of U.S. military advisor John Paul Vann's daily commander's reports, Andrade argues that the South Korean Army did not fight well in this battle and Vann's role was significant in encouraging passive Koreans to fight.<sup>12</sup> Still, he does not explain why this battle became a debatable fight for ROKA. In his book about the Vietnam War, historian Park Tae-gyun briefly argues that this battle is an example of the Korean forces' unnecessary sacrifices in the Vietnam War, but he overlooks the detailed events of the battle.<sup>13</sup> Although some studies argue that the Battle of An Khe Pass was an unsuccessful operation, why and how this battle failed, as well as the specifics that made it the toughest and most problematic fight in South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War, remain historically unexplored.

Before the Easter Offensive of North Vietnam's last all-out offensive in the Vietnam War, ROKFV not only had its internal morale and discipline problem but also had friction with the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces over conducting in the Vietnamization phase of the war. The Vietnamization policy, initiated by the Nixon administration in 1969 to end American involvement in the Vietnam War, profoundly impacted the war in South Vietnam. The U.S. engaged in peace talks with North Vietnam while pulling their troops out of Vietnam. As a result, as of March 1972 right before the Easter Offensive all U.S. ground combat troops were withdrawn except for two brigades in Military Regions (MR) 1 and 3.<sup>14</sup> Vietnamization required South Vietnam to fill the power vacuum created by the U.S. forces' withdrawal. Building ARVN

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<sup>12</sup> Dale Andrade, *Trial by Fire: The 1972 Easter Offensive America's Last Vietnam Battle* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1995), 291-298.

<sup>13</sup> Park Tae-gyun, *Pet'ūnamjōnjaeng* [The Vietnam War] (Seoul: Han'gyōrye Ch'ulp'an, 2015), 258.

<sup>14</sup> The U.S. forces had withdrawn after 1969: compared to its high point of the number of 543,500 in 1968, the US military personnel in Vietnam was reduced to 133,200 in January of 1972, and it became 45,600 in July. For more information, see Chōnp'yōnwi [War History Complication Committee], "Wōllam ch'amjōn t'onggye [A Statistics of the Dispatch in South Vietnam]," 1972, HB01620; Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 147; James H. Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 10; Graham A. Cosmas, *The Joint Command in Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 2006), 167.



As discussed in the previous chapter, the Korean troops in Vietnam began to seek more security within the ongoing Vietnamization. The underlying influence on the Korean inactivity during this period was that troops were no longer motivated to fight in a war with an ongoing withdrawal of the majority of American troops and the ROKFV's own impending withdrawal. Leaving Vietnam became a matter of time for South Korean soldiers, especially after the ROK Marine Brigade's withdrawal in December 1971 as initiated by Seoul's phased withdrawal plan of ROKFV in early 1971.

The South Vietnamese pushed the South Koreans to share the burden created by the U.S. forces' withdrawal. On 11 October 1970, ARVN requested ROKFV to take control over the An Khe area after the U.S. 4th Division's withdrawal.<sup>16</sup> However, ROKFV disapproved of the request due to the potential danger and difficulties in controlling Highway 19.<sup>17</sup> ROKFV's answer was a qualified consent with the condition of receiving additional mobile equipment – 94 M113 APCs, 44 M48 Tanks, and a total of 64 helicopters (44 UH1D, 12 UH1B, 8 OH6A) – from the U.S. forces. Although both ARVN II Corps and the U.S. I Field Force agreed and requested U.S. MACV to provide equipment to ROKFV, MACV ultimately refused this Korean request.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. forces did not find it necessary to pay for arming ROKA in return for their taking over this area, thinking that “any increased ROK effectiveness will carry with it an even higher price tag than now being paid.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, ROKFV turned down the request and the An Khe area became ARVN's responsibility. Since the Korean forces did not want to ruin their relationship

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<sup>16</sup> An Khe, west side of An Khe Pass, was the U.S. I Field Force's strategic foothold during the war: the 1st Cavalry Division stayed from September 1965 to April 1969, and the 173d Airborne Brigade from November 1967 to April 1969, and the 4th Infantry Division from March 1970 to December 1970. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, 73.

<sup>17</sup> “Mi 4 sadan chakchönji insu koryö [Reluctance to Take Over the U.S. 4th Division's TAOR],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 23 October 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu [ROKFV], “Tangmyönmunje [Matters in Hand],” 1972, HB01935.

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, “Republic of Korea (ROK) Forces in South Vietnam,” 26 June 1971, *FRUS*, Document 97.

with the South Vietnamese forces, they offered an alternative option to soothe South Vietnam: ROKA would take over the enemy 226 base area (six square kilometers), where they had already executed three operations between October 1969 and July 1970, instead of handing over the Phan Rang area to ARVN.<sup>20</sup> This negotiation did not pan out well either.

The South Vietnamese still wanted the Koreans to expand their TAOR and continued to demand it. On 10 April 1971, ARVN officially requested deployment of three ROKA regiments to the Central Highlands: Pleiku, Phu Nhon (forty-five kilometers south of Pleiku), and An Khe.<sup>21</sup> ROKFV was unhappy with this request and raised five reasons for the refusal. They were: “(1) Korean troops lack mobile equipment such as tanks, APCs, and helicopters, and our request for this equipment to MACV was refused; (2) Enemy provocations have increased in the ROK TAOR; (3) Pacification in the populated area [inside the current ROK TAOR] is more important before [South Vietnam’s] general election; (4) We are not able to support pacification operations in the highlands [because of the lack of equipment], (5) If only one Korean army division were left in the current ROK TAOR because of the relocation, it could imply ROKA’s soon withdrawal [abroad].”<sup>22</sup> South Koreans did not want to take a risk by expanding their TAOR without the guarantee of safety and equipment support.

The South Vietnamese were unhappy about the Koreans’ passivity and reluctance to share the military burden. On 26 February 1971, in a meeting with John Paul Vann, the U.S. senior military advisor in MR 2, Maj. Gen. Ngo Dzu, the commander of ARVN II Corps, complained that “the Koreans do not want to move out of their TAOR.” Dzu was also upset

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<sup>20</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, “Tangmyönmunje,” HB01935.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

because “ROKs didn’t want ARVN forces moving through their TAOR.”<sup>23</sup> In his report to the commander of MACV, General Creighton Abrams, Vann wrote: “I am sure it is not news to you that general Dzu and his subordinate staff and commanders are almost unanimous in expressing their distaste for the ROKs.”<sup>24</sup> The power vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal of forces in MR 2 further complicated the relationship between ARVN and ROKFV. One Korean newspaper article argued that the relationship between the two forces revealed problems after the U.S.’s influence had diminished.<sup>25</sup> The past cooperative system where the U.S. forces played a key role between the two forces and supported the two forces in II CTZ was no longer working at the same level as in the past. Although the new situation without the presence of U.S. ground troops required the two forces to cooperate closely, it did not go well. The South Vietnamese demanded even more from the Korean forces, but the Koreans were reluctant to take on additional risk.

In actuality, Korean forces had little confidence in South Vietnamese forces. The U.S. forces recognized this relationship as follows:

Most Korean officers frankly admit that they do not trust the Vietnamese. Many incidents have been reported where the Koreans refuse to pass plans of an impending ROKFV/ROKNAF combined operation to the American advisor until he promises not to tell his Vietnamese counterpart. The Koreans hold the RVNAF’s fighting ability in contempt and their attitude is known by the Vietnamese. ARVN commanders bitterly complain that everything the Koreans do is geared to increase ROK stature even at the expense of the Vietnamese.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Memorandum from Robert Tart to Deputy for CORDS, “Meeting with General Dzu on 26 February,” 26 February 1971, Folder 17, Box 33, Douglas Pike Collection, VNCA.

<sup>24</sup> Message to General Creighton Abrams from John P. Vann, “Assessment of ROKF Impact in the 1971 Cold Efforts,” 7 June 1971, Folder 17, Box 23, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>25</sup> “5 nyŏn kwan'gyeüi öje onül [Yesterday and Today of Five-Year Relationship],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 7 October 1970.

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum for Deputy Secretary of Defense, “Republic of Korea Forces in Vietnam (ROKFV),” 12 August 1969, Box 12, CORDS Historical Working Group Files 1967-1973, RG 472, NARA II.

ROKFV often complained about the irresponsibility of the South Vietnamese forces. Lt. Col. Lee wrote in his diary that “suddenly ARVN notified us that they will operate in this area. Why are they going to launch operations in another’s territory? What is their intention for this? ... But they suddenly notified the cancellation of the plan at 11 a.m. today. They are always having their own way. They cannot be trusted and show no loyalty.”<sup>27</sup> However, the relationship between the two forces was not just a simple conflict. While critical of the Korean troops’ inactivity, the South Vietnamese wanted them to stay in Vietnam. In early 1971, when the South Korean government announced the plan to withdraw one Korean division from Vietnam by the end of the year, it was the South Vietnamese who strongly opposed Seoul’s plan.<sup>28</sup> Without preliminary discussion with the U.S., Saigon requested Seoul to delay the Korean troops’ first phase withdrawal until early 1973.<sup>29</sup> Over three hundred South Vietnamese in Qui Nhon held a demonstration against Seoul’s plan for pulling their forces out.<sup>30</sup> The *Dong-a Ilbo* reported that “according to one South Vietnamese Catholic priest who took a poll, 80 percent of Saigon citizens are opposing ROKFV’s withdrawal.”<sup>31</sup> At the conference of troop-contributing countries in Washington D.C., the Minister of Foreign Affairs of South Vietnam, Tran Van Lam argued that since South Koreans were performing an excellent operation in the strategically important and vast area of the east coast, the reduction of one ROK division would place a huge burden on ARVN, who would have to make up for the South Koreans’ departure.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Lee, *Kasūmūl ttulk’o kan chōkt’an, Kunbokūn pukke p’iro multūlgo*, 350-351.

<sup>28</sup> “Chuwōlgun 1 kaesa kot ch’ōlsu [One Division of ROKFV will Withdraw Soon],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 19 April 1971.

<sup>29</sup> “Republic of Korea Forces in Viet-Nam (ROKFV),” FRUS, Document 95; “Wōlnam ch’amchōnkuk oesanghoeūi che 5 sin [The Fifth Memorandum of the Foreign Ministers Conference],” 22 April 1972, *Documents of Six Allied Countries’ Foreign Ministers Conference*, 1972, HB02683.

<sup>30</sup> “Han’gukkun ch’ōlsu pandae temo [Demonstrations against ROKFV’s Withdrawal],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 29 March 1971.

<sup>31</sup> “Chuwōl kukkun ch’ōlsu chiyōn [Delay of the ROKFV’s Withdrawal],” *Dong-a Ilbo*, 26 March 1971.

<sup>32</sup> “Wōlnam ch’amchōnkuk oesanghoeūi che 5 sin,” HB02683.

The U.S. also had a complex view of the Korean performance throughout Vietnamization. In fact, Korean forces were regarded as a necessary evil for the U.S. to achieve Vietnamization. For Vietnamization to be successful, a capable ARVN would have to be built; diverting the limited resources from ROKFV to ARVN was desirable. On the other hand, Korean forces would have to remain in South Vietnam until ARVN was able to stand alone.<sup>33</sup> Lt. Gen. Arthur S. Collins, Jr, the U.S. I Field Force commander, having worked with the Korean troops from February 1970 to January 1971, commented on Korean performance based on his military perspective in his debriefing report: “the cumulative results that we get from a two division ROK force equates to what one can expect from one good US brigade. ... In spite of this [U.S.’s] all-out support, the ROKs did not undertake as many operations as they could and should have.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, General Abrams had a negative view of the Korean troops in Vietnam. In his memorandum to Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Abrams stated, “the ROKFV might be used in a new or expanded role,” and Koreans “will be encouraged to expand their efforts and contribution in-country within their capabilities.”<sup>35</sup> However, Abrams, as a commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, admitted, “the progress of Vietnamization can best be sustained by the ROKs remaining in their present location.”<sup>36</sup> He further argued that “ROKFV make a tangible and valuable contribution to Vietnamization and overall US SEA goals by continued performance in their present role,” and

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<sup>33</sup> Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, “ROK Forces in Viet-Nam,” 3 November 1971, *FRUS*, Document 114.

<sup>34</sup> “Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Lieutenant General A. S. Collins, Jr,” 9 February 1971, Reel 4, U.S. Army Senior Officer Debriefing Reports (microfilm), VNCA.

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum for Admiral McCain from General Abrams, “Republic of Korea Forces, Vietnam (ROKFV),” 21 March 1971, Folder 16, Box 2, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

the withdrawal of the U.S. ground troops would be “predicated on continued ROK presence in MR 2 for the foreseeable future.”<sup>37</sup>

In some way, the South Vietnamese’ poor performance justified Korean troop retention. According to one study by U.S. staff officers, the U.S. advisors agreed “some changes must be made with respect to the ROK Forces in MR-2,” however, “in reality it is doubtful that the ROK Forces would be too receptive to the idea of leaving the security of their compounds to operate in the more contested areas.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the Americans knew that two ARVN divisions were not a sufficient amount of forces for the “massive land area of MR 2.” Moreover, South Vietnamese forces, especially regional forces (RF) having to defend their own regions, had poor leadership and motivation and were not able to properly perform the missions.<sup>39</sup> In this situation, the U.S. could not simply withdraw the South Korean forces. ROKFV commander General Lee understood this situation and commented that “the allied forces [the U.S. and South Vietnamese] are thankful for us because they at least do not have to worry about the Korean TAOR.”<sup>40</sup>

While Saigon was opposing the Korean troop withdrawal, Washington debated whether the South Korean forces were indispensable and useful for Vietnamization, based on the U.S. military’s most common view that ROKFV was not being used to the greatest advantage at the time. The U.S. understood that Seoul’s plan “could be more of a trial balloon than a formal and fixed position,” and “their withdrawal rate may be subject to our own reaction to their proposal.”<sup>41</sup> On 23 June 1971, President Nixon finally decided to “support the continued

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> CPT Donald Rogan and CPT Stanley Miller, “Study: Assessment of Combat Power,” 21 October 1971, Folder 17, Box 23, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> “Kukkun jönsul chiyök pulbyön [No Change in ROKFV’s TAOR],” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 8 February 1972.

<sup>41</sup> Memorandum from John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), “ROK Troop Withdrawals from Vietnam,” 13 April 1971, *FRUS*, Document 89.

presence of two ROK divisions in South Vietnam through CY 1972,” following one of the four alternative options provided by Secretary of State William Pierce Rogers and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, based on General Abrams and U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker’s opinions, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird wanted to remove the South Korean forces from Vietnam, arguing, “I believe more effective military use can be made of the resources which would otherwise be diverted to the ROK units.”<sup>43</sup> However, Laird’s argument did not overturn Nixon’s decision to support ROKFV to the end of 1972.

Since the retention of ROKA was decided upon, the U.S. forces had to admit the necessity of ROK forces as valuable assets and therefore requested improved Korean performance for Vietnamization. The U.S. forces admitted the “reality” of the Vietnamization scheme which influenced the general Korean inactivity “as the American units continue to be drawn down the ROK units’ enthusiasm and aggressiveness wanes.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, decreasing support in their operations due to the U.S. ground troops’ withdrawal was like an excuse for ROK inactivity. Lt. Col. Lee Jae-tae showed skepticism about the future of the Vietnam War in his diary by stating, “how can we get support and keep combat power after the U.S. troop withdrawal?”<sup>45</sup> For example, reductions in U.S. helicopter support became one of the practical excuses for Koreans being passive in their military operations in the Vietnamization phase. ROKFV considered reduced helicopter support to be a limiting factor for conducting operations. Compared to early 1971, when ROKFV was able to get eleven UH-1H companies’ support (a total of sixty helicopters), in 1972 they were able to get only three companies (a total of fifteen

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<sup>42</sup> “Republic of Korea Forces in Viet-Nam (ROKFV),” *FRUS*, Document 95.

<sup>43</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, “Republic of Korea (ROK) Forces in South Vietnam,” *FRUS*, Document 97.

<sup>44</sup> “Study of Assessment of Combat Power,” VNCA.

<sup>45</sup> Lee, *Kasūmūl tulk’o kan chōkt’an, Kunbokūn pukke p’iro multūlgo*, 390.

helicopters) to support them.<sup>46</sup> In the meeting with Vann, in late February of 1972, the two ROKA division commanders expressed their disappointment in the lack of helicopter support.<sup>47</sup> ROKFV estimated the helicopter support would continue to decrease, and thus regarded battalion-level operations as no longer possible.

In this context, General William Westmoreland, the Chief of Staff of the Army and the former MACV commander, advised General Abrams to contact Seoul directly in order to expand ROKFV's role and to provide the ROKFV with appropriate support to activate their forces.<sup>48</sup> In early February of 1972, Washington decided to accept part of the Korean requirements based on the idea that ROKFV was essential to the success of Vietnamization after Seoul warned Philip Habib, Ambassador to South Korea, that ROKFV would begin to withdraw unless they receive adequate assurances of logistical support and equipment from the U.S.<sup>49</sup> However, the U.S. support for Korean forces was not on the same level as what they had received in the past, and ROKFV remained inactive despite pressure from the U.S. and South Vietnam. In early April of 1972, Seoul refused Saigon's official request to take over the ARVN 22d Division's TAOR which was north of the ROK Capital Division's territory. General Lee answered that a military operation without taking over the region would be possible with enough American operating support, but there was no such promise from the U.S. forces.<sup>50</sup> Just as the issue of the ROKFV's

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<sup>46</sup> Chuwöl han'gukkun saryöngbu, "Tangmyönmunje," HB01935.

<sup>47</sup> Memo to Mr. Vann and BG Wear from William Gist III, Second Regional Assistance Group, "Operations for ROK Forces," 5 February 1972, Folder 17, Box 23, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>48</sup> Message from Gen. Westmoreland to Adm. Moorer, "Requesting ROK Forces to Prepare Contingency Plans," 1 February 1972, Folder 6, Box 17, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>49</sup> Memorandum from John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Haig), "ROK Forces in South Vietnam," 5 February 1972, *FRUS*, Document 124.

<sup>50</sup> "Wöllamjakchön sanghwang mit wöllamsusangyoch'öngge üihan myöndamgyölgwa pogo [A Result Report on the Situation of South Vietnam and the Meeting with the Prime Minister of South Vietnam]," 14 April 1972, Report no. 72-243, The Presidential Secretariat, Republic of Korea Presidential Archives at Sejong, South Korea; "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," in *Pyölich'aek söhanmunjip* [Collection of Documents and Pictures], ed. Lee Se-ho (Seoul: Daeyang Media, 2009), 135-136.

inactivity and eventual withdrawal moved to the fore and grew into an ongoing political issue among the three countries, North Vietnam launched the Easter Offensive in 1972, and the Battle of An Khe Pass took place. It was the moment to break the lull of Vietnamization, and Koreans had to struggle for their fighting.

### **Predictable but Unexpected Disaster: The Koreans' Failure in Securing An Khe Pass**

An Khe Pass, a particularly dangerous 7.5 kilometers stretch of Highway 19 in the An Khe mountainous area, lay fifty-five kilometers northwest of the port city of Qui Nhon and twenty-three kilometers east of An Khe. Highway 19, from Qui Nhon through Pleiku to the Cambodian border, was one of the most important supply routes in II CTZ (MR 2).<sup>51</sup> Before the Easter Offensive of 1972, An Khe Pass was the northwest edge of the ROK Capital Division's TAOR. The 1st Company of the ROK Tiger Cavalry Regiment had taken charge of the An Khe Pass. In order to control this area, the 1st Company built a base on Hill 600 close to the Q-curve of An Khe Pass and put platoon bases on Hill 240, two kilometers east of Hill 600, and on Hill 168, four kilometers east of Hill 600. In addition to these bases, the Korean company used thirty outposts to control this area.<sup>52</sup>

Hill 638 was located only 520 meters to the southeast of Hill 600 (Korean company base) along the ridgeline. Both hills were in an excellent location to dominate the Q-curve of the highway. Thus, the 1st Company built its base on hill 600 and put a platoon-size base on Hill

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<sup>51</sup> John M. Carland, *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington, D.C., 2000), 41, 96.

<sup>52</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa*, vol.10, 179-180; Kim Jong-sik, "Chönt'usugi [The Combat Memoir]," in Kukpangbu kunsap'yönoch'anyön'guso [The Institute for Military History, Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea], *Chüngönül t'onghae pon pet'ünam chönjaenggwa han'gukkun* [Looking at the Vietnam War and ROK Forces Through Oral Testimonies], vol.1 (Seoul: Kukpangbu kunsap'yönoch'anyön'guso, 2001), 809-812.

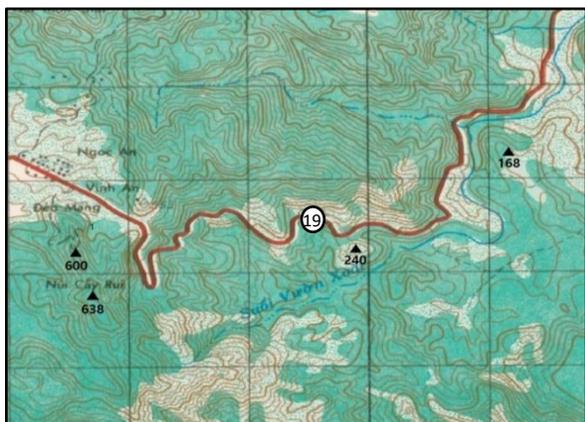
638. However, after August 1971, the 1st Company pulled the platoon out of Hill 638 and closed the base following the order to focus on education and training before the pending ROKFV withdrawal.<sup>53</sup> The North Vietnamese Army (NVA), which infiltrated through ARVN's territory north and west of An Khe Pass, gradually fortified the abandoned Hill 638 with the various materials Koreans had left behind. As a result, Hill 638 became the NVA's main base for operations in this area. An estimated 2,280 soldiers of the PAVN and Viet Cong had already occupied several hills and ambushed the An Khe Pass area before the actual battle started.<sup>54</sup> The 1st Company had a lapse in its patrolling and was unaware the enemy held Hill 638 for approximately one month prior to the assault on their own base. Even if the 1st Company's territory was wide and the ARVN failed to stop the North Vietnamese forces' infiltration, it is hard to comprehend the ignorance of the enemy's presence on Hill 638 – especially considering it was merely 520 meters from their main base on Hill 600. The enemy on Hill 638 could have easily been discovered if ROKA had carried out a proper reconnaissance operation.

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<sup>53</sup> Choi Yong-ho, *Han'gwŏnŭro ingnŭn pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun* [The Vietnam War and the ROK forces] (Seoul: Kukpangbu Kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso [The Institute for Military History], 2004), 357.

<sup>54</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awŏl han'gukkun chŏnsa*, vol.10, 177-178.

Figure 22. An Khe Pass [1:50,000]



Sources: Binh Khe (Binh Lien), June 30, 1973, Vietnam Archive Map Collection, VNCA.<sup>55</sup>

Figure 23. Hill 638 and 600 from the Q-Curve



Sources: Robert E. Lee's Blog.<sup>56</sup>

In a meeting with General Dzu, Maj. Gen. Kang Won-chae, the commander of ROKFV Field Command, and the Korean staff, three days before the Koreans came under surprise attack, Vann warned to pay “attention to road security east of An Khe in the ROK TAOR.”<sup>57</sup> Since the Easter Offensive had already started in late March 1972, every unit in MR 2 should have already strengthened their security in their own areas. Based on their testimonies, both the Capital Division commander and the Cavalry Regimental commander had ordered their units to strengthen patrols and reconnaissance operations several times.<sup>58</sup> After he started his new post in November 1971, Maj. Gen. Chung Tūk-man, the Capital Division commander, emphasized daily reconnaissance operations within a two-kilometer radius of the base.<sup>59</sup> However, the regiment's company commanders and platoon leaders testified that they focused on combat training and strengthening the base instead of engaging in actual reconnaissance operations. The commander

<sup>55</sup> This map is edited and supplemented from the original one.

<sup>56</sup> This picture is edited and supplemented from the original one Lee took from the helicopter when he flew above An Khe Pass, <http://www.lifesjoy.net/WebMaster/Vietnam/AnKhe/AnKhe.htm> (accessed 9 August 2018).

<sup>57</sup> Message from John Vann to Creighton Abrams, “Increased Support by ROK Forces, II Corps,” 8 April 1972, Folder 2, Box 24, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>58</sup> Kukpangbu Kunsap'yŏnch'anyŏn'guso, *Chŏngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 781-805.

<sup>59</sup> Lee, *Kasŭmŭl tulk'o kan chŏkt'an*, *Kunbokŭn pukke p'iro multŭlgo*, 466.

of the 1st Company, Capt. Kim Jong-sik, later testified that although he knew the importance of Hill 638 after he became company commander on 1 April (ten days before the battle started), he was not able to patrol this area because his company was instead busy working on small-unit combat drills and the auditing of equipment and supplies by order of the higher command.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, neglecting Hill 638 was an obvious security failure for ROKA, resulting in a tough fight to reoccupy the area; yet no one was held accountable for this failure since this battle was regarded as a success. Even though the 1st Company was not able to mount reconnaissance operations, neglecting the order from the division constituted the company's violation of military discipline – namely disobedience and false reporting.

In fact, preventing further decline in morale and discipline amongst ROK troops had already become an issue in the early phase of Vietnamization. After General Lee Se-ho became a commander of ROKFV in May 1969, in addition to emphasizing a strong fighting spirit while conducting offensive combat operations, he started to highlight “strengthening mental armament and maintaining military discipline,” during his second quarterly senior commanders’ meeting on 25 September 1969.<sup>61</sup> In 1970, General Lee issued “Three Creeds and Five Precepts” to maintain and strengthen soldiers’ morale and discipline by indoctrinating them in everyday life. The “Five Precepts” prohibited disobedience, neglecting guard duties, business activity (black market), crimes against civilians, and false reports.<sup>62</sup> This directive paradoxically showed that those bad behaviors had become an issue inside ROKFV. Lee admitted that he punished soldiers who

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<sup>60</sup> Kim Jong-sik interview, 23 October 1984, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 785.

<sup>61</sup> Lee, “Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973),” 159-160.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-196; Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu [ROKFV], *Wŏllamjŏn chonghap yŏn’gu* [Comprehensive Research on the Vietnam War], 1974, 60-68.

committed these misbehaviors, then emphasized that prevention of crime would be more important than punishment.<sup>63</sup>

However, as ROKFV became more passive and defensive, its morale and discipline declined as well. Maj. Gen. Kim Young-sun, the 9th (White Horse) Division commander, felt betrayed when he first received a false report and fabricated achievements in November 1971. He wrote, “since this was too shameful, I decided to solve the problems one by one from now on.”<sup>64</sup> At the first commanders’ meeting on 18 January 1972, General Kim emphasized tightening military discipline by eradicating false reports and disobedience.<sup>65</sup> The end of the war atmosphere strengthened their attitude of self-preservation, likely promoting the idea that their deaths would be meaningless. In his diary on 4 September 1971, Lt. Col. Lee wrote, “withdrawal would be good considering the cause and the current situation. ... Let’s go home as soon as possible.” On 9 September, he wrote that “we do not necessarily bleed in another’s land.”<sup>66</sup> As the withdrawal approached, it became more difficult to expect more sacrifices from Korean soldiers in Vietnam. Whereas the South Vietnamese at least could have found a motivation to defend their own country, the South Koreans’ will to fight faded away. As a result, prior to the Easter Offensive and the Battle of An Khe Pass, Korean forces were passive and lacked motivation.

ROKFV’s condition at this time negatively affected its conduct in this battle. Capt. Kim Jong-sik, whose company was responsible for neglecting the enemy on Hill 638, wrote: “ten days after [I started as a company commander], I found that one-third of the thirty outposts were

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<sup>63</sup> Chuwöl han’gukkun saryöngbu, *Wöllamjön chonghap yön’gu*, 67.

<sup>64</sup> Kim Young-sun, *Paengmagojiüi kwangyöng* [Glory of the White Horse Hill] (Seoul: P’albogwön, 1997), 219.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>66</sup> Lee, *Kasümül tulkt’o kan chökt’an*, *Kunbokün pukke p’iro multülgo*, 358-359.

sleeping when I patrolled the outposts in my company sector after 23:00. I was so upset and frustrated. I thought soldiers had lost their drive because they had not experienced combat for a while.”<sup>67</sup> Capt. Kim also met resistance from veteran soldiers when he started intensive training of his company upon becoming the new company commander.<sup>68</sup> After the company base was attacked by the enemy, Col. Kim Ch’ang-yŏl, the commander of the Cavalry Regiment, sent his reconnaissance company to search the An Khe Pass area. However, the reconnaissance operation was stopped because of an enemy ambush. The company commander was wounded, and seven soldiers were killed including two platoon leaders.<sup>69</sup> 3d Platoon leader Chung Chong-t’ae testified that when he led the assault team to retrieve bodies, no one was willing to follow him. Soldiers were still hiding under a drain pipe at the side of the path in fear. Minutes later, 1st Platoon leader and one soldier followed him but the 1st Platoon leader was killed by enemy fire.<sup>70</sup> The ROKFV’s operation evaluation report for the Battle of An Khe Pass argued that Korean soldiers were not ready for fierce combat, stating that nineteen soldiers had received dishonorable discharges for retreating from the battlefield without permission during this battle.<sup>71</sup>

According to their testimonies, senior commanders blamed junior officers for the difficulty of the battle because of their lack of fighting spirit. Many junior officers blamed their soldiers, saying that soldiers did not move despite being given the attack order; they further claimed that some soldiers hid in the jungle or ran away from the battlefield. Before the battle,

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<sup>67</sup> Kim Jong-sik, “Chŏnt’usugi [A Combat Memoir],” in *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 809.

<sup>68</sup> Park Kyung-suk, “Pet’ŭnamjŏnjaengŭi yangsanggwa han’gukkun chakchŏnŭi kyohun [The Vietnam War and the lesson from the Korean forces’ operation],” in *Pet’ŭnamjŏnjaeng yŏn’gu ch’ongsŏ*, vol.1, 341.

<sup>69</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awŏl han’gukkun chŏnsa*, vol.10, 183.

<sup>70</sup> Chung Chong-t’ae interview 14 November 1984, *Chungon Ul Tonghae Bon Betunam Jeonjaengkwa Hangukkun*, vol.1, 790.

<sup>71</sup> Chuwŏl han’gukkun saryŏngbu [ROKFV], “Chakchŏn p’yŏngga bogosŏ [The Operation Evaluation Report],” 23 June 1972, HB02619.

most of these Korean soldiers had little experience with conventional operations in their one-year dispatch term during the lull in the fighting in the Vietnamization period. Besides, the low morale and self-preservation attitude as they waited for future withdrawal became evident during this battle. There was no sense of urgency for the Korean soldiers, and the officers had difficulty ordering their soldiers into combat. At least, many junior officers were in the front lines during combat and demonstrated leadership by sacrificing themselves: Seventeen platoon leaders (six KIA, eleven WIA) and six company commanders (one KIA, five WIA).<sup>72</sup> The loss of junior officers impeded group cohesion, as the after-action report analyzed, “the loss of leaders made it difficult to command the combat troops and lowered the morale of soldiers [during this battle]. Moreover, there was a lack of a plan to replace and supplement the loss of combat leaders.”<sup>73</sup>

At 5:05 am on 11 April 1972, a squad-sized PAVN assaulted the 1st Company of the ROK Cavalry Regiment’s base on Hill 600 in the An Khe Pass. Korean soldiers who were searching for enemies after the assault came under a surprise attack from an enemy ambush.<sup>74</sup> They discovered that the North Vietnamese had started an operation from their former base on Hill 638, which was close to Hill 600. The enemy’s intention was not to capture the Korean base, but only to block the An Khe Pass. On that day, Vann described, “enemy forces supported by tube artillery of the 105mm class, mortars and B-40s have continued attacking the fire support bases plus the lines of communications of Highways 19 and 14.”<sup>75</sup> The North Vietnamese continuously fired on the Korean bases as a harassing tactic, and at the same time they blew up a bridge and a road. As a result, Highway 19 was blocked on the morning of 12 April. PAVN’s

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<sup>72</sup> Che 1 kigabyöndaek [ROK Cavalry Regiment], “Ank’ep’aesü chakchön chönt’usangbo [After Action Report on the Battle of An Khe Pass],” 1972, HB00230.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol. 10, 180.

<sup>75</sup> Message from John Vann to Creighton Abrams, “12 April 1972 Vietnam Evaluation,” 12 April 1972, Folder 10, Box 23, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

blocking of Highway 19 took place as a part of the Easter Offensive. North Vietnam launched the large-scale conventional offensive on 30 March 1972, attacking ARVN in three directions with twelve PAVN divisions. This offensive was instrumental in North Vietnam's objective to gain an advantageous position in the armistice talks against the Nixon Administration by destroying the ARVN main forces.<sup>76</sup> In MR 2, the PAVN's main attack was aimed to destroy the main force of the ARVN II Corps in Kontum and Pleiku.<sup>77</sup> Thus, blocking Highway 19 and cutting off ARVN's supply line was a supporting attack to achieve their major objective. On the other hand, controlling the An Khe Pass was operationally vital for the South Vietnamese II Corps.

During the first phase of the battle from 11 to 14 April, only one ROKA company intermittently attacked the enemy hill, without any information about the size or intention of the enemy. Even when ROKA became aware of the enemy presence on Hill 638, they wanted to avoid a costly battle if possible. Koreans knew that an attack on the enemy's stronghold would cause heavy casualties. On the afternoon of 12 April, the regimental commander decided to upgrade the operation to battalion level, with a plan to attach three companies from other battalions to the 1st Battalion.<sup>78</sup> The 1st Battalion commander, Lt. Col. Han Kyu-won, moved his command post (CP) to Hill 600, and he assumed responsibility to command this operation. However, no actual operation occurred on that day. At 09:30 on 13 April, the battalion commander ordered the 3d Company to assault Hill 638. However, the attack stopped after

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<sup>76</sup> Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 10-11. With the withdrawal of U.S. ground forces, Hanoi decided to conduct a major conventional offensive to bring the war to a rapid conclusion, or to testify the effectiveness of the ARVN and forces of South Vietnam. For more understanding of the Easter Offensive, see Andrade, *Trial by Fire: The 1972 Easter Offensive America's Last Vietnam Battle*.

<sup>77</sup> Ngo, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 10-11.

<sup>78</sup> Chung Tük-man interview, 15 November 1984, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 781-783. Kukpangbu, *P'awŏl han'gukkun chŏnsa*, vol.10, 184.

suffering twelve casualties around 13:30.<sup>79</sup> Observing three days of Korean operations, Vann criticized Korean performance, saying, “the ROK’s did not work in aggressive operation... the regimental commander responsible for the ROK portion of Highway 19 has not left his CP for the last three days and appeared both unknowledgeable and unconcerned.”<sup>80</sup>

On that day, ROKFV generals, including General Kang and General Chung, visited Hill 600 to evaluate the situation. They had to leave hastily after the command post was attacked and two casualties were caused by enemy mortar fire from Hill 638.<sup>81</sup> Hill 600, the location of the Korean command post, was vulnerable to enemy fire and continuously obstructed the operation. On 14 April, the 3d Company again attacked the enemy hill but failed, with fifteen additional casualties. The battalion commander could not help but withdraw the 3d Company from the area of operation. It was not until that day that ROKFV obtained enemy information from an ARVN report shedding light on the fact that this hill’s enemy contingent was the PAVN 12d Regiment of the 3d Division.<sup>82</sup> According to the American liaison officer, Korean forces suffered “35 KIA plus many wounded” over four days.<sup>83</sup>

Although they dealt with casualties, the Koreans did not necessarily want to fight and risk sacrificing more soldiers. The Koreans realized that this battle would be a contest of will on each side: attack or defend, gain or lose, live or die. The access route to Hill 638 was rugged and covered with dense forest, thus limiting options for effective maneuvers. Soldiers were compelled to have a toe-to-toe fight. But the Koreans wanted to avoid this contest because it

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<sup>79</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol.10, 185-186.

<sup>80</sup> Message from John Vann to Creighton Abrams, “Daily Commander’s Evaluation,” 13 April 1972, Folder 2, Box 24, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>81</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol.10, 186.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>83</sup> Message from John Vann to Creighton Abrams, “Daily Commander’s Evaluation,” 14 April 1972.

would be accompanied by an enormous sacrifice of lives. During the second phase from 15 to 18 April, the Koreans used firepower, but a massive attack did not occur. The ROKA's inactive engagement frustrated Vann's expectations, and the Koreans found themselves in additional conflict with the Americans over their performance in this battle. Against Vann's criticism that "the ROKs appear to have no plan to clear the pass other than massive quantities of fire support,"<sup>84</sup> the division commander, General Chung, countered that "since most U.S. ground troops had withdrawn at that time, the air support was insufficient. Especially, helicopter support was available only four to five times a day and we could not move troops at the same time. We had no choice but to use troops piecemeal."<sup>85</sup> The *Dong-a Ilbo* reported that the Korean forces' operation was hampered by lack of U.S. helicopter support.<sup>86</sup> The *Kyunghyang Shinmun* wrote: "ROKA was not able to get tank and gunship support despite their request from the South Vietnamese and the U.S., and the field commanders resented the lack of U.S. support. ... This struggle [experienced at the Battle of An Khe Pass] was predicted when the U.S. ground troops withdrew."<sup>87</sup>

On 15 April, ROKA finally was able to direct heavy fire onto Hill 638 and the suspected enemy ambush area. About 2,900 rounds of artillery were fired, and a total of forty-one sorties of U.S. F-4 fighters bombed the targeted area for two days.<sup>88</sup> Yet, ROKA did not move to attack Hill 638 during the bombardment. Instead of attacking Hill 638, the 1st Battalion commander ordered the attached 6th Company from the 2d Battalion to proceed to the no-name hill located

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Chung Tük-man interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 783.

<sup>86</sup> "Han'gukkun wŏlmaenggun'gwa kyŏkchŏn [The Fierce Battle against the North Vietnamese Forces]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 15 April 1972.

<sup>87</sup> "Changbi jiwŏnŏpshi akchogŏn soge kot'u kŏdŭp [The Struggle Without Equipment Support]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 19 April 1972.

<sup>88</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awŏl han'gukkun chŏnsa*, vol.10, 187; Che 1 kigabyŏndae, "Ank'ep'aesŭ chakchŏn chŏnt'usangbo," HB00230.

three kilometers southeast of Hill 638 in order to pressure the main enemy into a reaction. The unit was soon surrounded and isolated by the already-ambushed enemy, and even during the landing from the helicopters, they had already lost thirteen soldiers. They started digging to build a hasty defensive position.<sup>89</sup> The 2d Battalion commander then used the 5th Company to attempt an evacuation of the 6th Company, but they could not move because of enemy fire and were stuck on a ridge.<sup>90</sup> Another fight on the no-name hill caused only additional difficulties in concentrating their forces against the enemy's stronghold on Hill 638.

### **“Mission Accomplished!?”: ROKFV’s Large-scale Retaking Operation**

As the battle slowly evolved, it attracted domestic and foreign spotlights. Several American newspapers ran stories about this battle conducted by the Korean troops. The *Pacific Stars and Stripes* painted a negative view of the Korean troops:

Communist troops have succeeded in blocking a strategic highway pass in the central highlands for four days, and the efforts of South Korean soldiers to dislodge them is attracting scores of spectators in a “carnival atmosphere,” ... South Vietnamese officers were angry with the Koreans, asserting that they were not trying hard enough to drive the Reds out of fortified positions controlling the An Khe Pass on Highway 19. ... “A year or two ago the South Koreans could have handled this job very quickly,” said one South Vietnamese officer. “Now they are moving very slowly because they are going home.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Chung T'ae-kyōng interview, 24 May 1984, *Chūngōnūl t'onghae pon pet'ūnam chōnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 795.

<sup>90</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awōl han'gukkun chōnsa*, vol.10, 197-201.

<sup>91</sup> “‘Carnival’ Battle,” *Pacific Stars & Stripes*, 15 April 1972.

Vann expressed concern to General Abrams that the “ROV-VN relationship ... [has] deteriorated badly in the past two weeks,” arguing that “ROKs have been so insensitive to the grave tactical situation, and so unresponsive to both requests for assistance and to meeting their assigned responsibilities.”<sup>92</sup> The *New York Times* article stated: “Coordination was poor and the Koreans accidentally killed a number of Vietnamese soldiers by shelling. Since then the Vietnamese have restricted their operations to the part of the road west of Anke and the Koreans have not made any progress.”<sup>93</sup> One South Vietnamese officer characterized Koreans as “damned and bad soldiers.”<sup>94</sup> To the U.S. and South Vietnamese, the seriousness of the Korean inactivity during the Vietnamization period surfaced in this battle. Vann revealed his distrust of the ROKA’s operation: “the ROK performance at An Khe from the top down raises serious questions as to the validity of ROK reported battlefield successes in the past.”<sup>95</sup>

However, since the north and west side of An Khe Pass was the responsibility of ARVN, Koreans thought South Vietnamese were also responsible for the security failure and the reopening Highway 19. The *Kyunghyang Shinmun* reported: “The South Vietnamese Army shifted their responsibility to us after Highway 19 was closed.”<sup>96</sup> And it was still hard for Korean

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<sup>92</sup> Message from John Vann to Creighton Abrams, “An Khe Pass Operation by the ROKs and Related Matters,” 18 April 1972, Folder 17, Box 23, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>93</sup> “Ankhe, Now a Highlands Ghost Town, Remains an Important Battlefield,” *New York Times*, 22 April 1972.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> “An Khe Pass Operation by the ROKs and Related Matters,” 18 April 1972, VNCA. Here is Vann’s suggestion of ROKA’s problem: “A. The extremely high (30:1) kill reported. [Vann thought this was not true.] B. Our inability to find out the disposition of enemy weapons reported captured. C. The absolute secrecy maintained by the ROKs even after operation is over. D. Either unwillingness or inability on the part of the ROKs to reveal the type of tactics that result in such great successes. I directed both my G3 and the US liaison officers to the ROKs to analyze the ROK operations to determine if there were lessons learned on tactics that could be applied elsewhere. In both Attempts, we drew complete blanks. E. The almost total inflexibility of ROKs. As far as we can determine, battlefield plans are almost never changed to meet the exigencies of the situation. This has been clearly evident in the current battle. F. Massive reliance upon US TAC Air and gunships. G. Extreme ineptness in the use of artillery.”

<sup>96</sup> “Changbi jiwönöpshi akchogön soqe kot’u ködöp,” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*.

soldiers to justify their sacrifice for the South Vietnamese. One Korean soldier, who lost seven fellow soldiers in the operation noted, “when I saw South Vietnamese militia and civilians were watching our operation and laughing at us, I shot an M16 in the air towards them. ... I was too upset to kill them when they laughed at us. We came here and were dying because of them. They are pathetic people.”<sup>97</sup> This battle revealed a rift between both the Korean and U.S. forces as well as the Koreans and the South Vietnamese. In spite of the Koreans’ complex feelings about this battle, the Battle of An Khe Pass was becoming a matter of Korea’s national pride before American and South Vietnamese eyes.

Korean field commanders were getting more pressure as the battle continued. The division commander, General Chung, testified that he was pressed by the ROKFV and ARVN headquarters to reopen the route quickly.<sup>98</sup> On 16 April, Vann sent a letter to the ROKFV Field commander, General Kang. In the letter, Vann emphasized that “Highway 19 must be reopened soon and must be kept open.”<sup>99</sup> He pressed the ROKA to operate aggressively: “it appears to me that the situation in the An Khe Pass is so critical as to justify a minimum of twice as many troops as are now being utilized there. I strongly urge your consideration for beefing up this effort so as to expedite the opening of the pass.”<sup>100</sup> From an operational standpoint, Vann was right and the Korean Army should have quickly reopened Highway 19. Korean commanders also understood the importance of Highway 19 as the primary supply line for the main forces of ARVN II Corps, who were defending areas against the NVA’s main effort. On 19 April, in

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<sup>97</sup> Kwon, “An Khe Jeontu Chamjeon Soogi,” 279-280

<sup>98</sup> Chung Tūk-man interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t’onghae pon pet’ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 783.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from John P. Vann to Kang Won Chae, 16 April 1972, Folder 17, Box 23, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

addition to the ROKFV Field commander and the Division commander's frequent visits, ROKFV commander Lee Se-ho himself visited the battlefield.<sup>101</sup>

On 17 April, the ROK Army resumed attacking Hill 638. The 1st Battalion commander ordered two companies to attack. Two companies started a parallel attack at 15:00, but after two hours, when the 3d Platoon of the 3d Company was stopped by enemy fire, the battalion commander withdrew them.<sup>102</sup> At that time, Vann, General Dzu, key members of ROKFV, and General Chung and his staff, met together at the ROK command post on Hill 600 to watch the ROK's operation. In that meeting, both Vann and Dzu complained about the ROK's operation. In the report to Abrams, Vann described the situation at that time: "The ROK Division Commander became somewhat upset, particularly when Gen Dzu observed that sufficient forces had not yet employed."<sup>103</sup> The terrain made it more difficult for soldiers to hide and cover themselves because the routes were burnt to the ground during the bombardment. Moreover, the enemy still existed despite the harsh bombardment. They had had a month to strengthen Hill 638 and had dug deep trenches that protected their soldiers from artillery and bombing.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, it was discovered that these piecemeal attacks supported by firepower simply did not work against this stubborn and prepared enemy. Vann pointed out that "Korean troops were making short forays from their strongholds during the day, but at nightfall returned to safety behind the barbed wire."<sup>105</sup> The day-time piecemeal attacks could not be decisive and only resulted in many additional casualties.

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<sup>101</sup> "Wölmaenggun maengho sammyönhöpkong [The Enemy's Pincer Movement to Tiger]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 20 April 1972.

<sup>102</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awöl han'gukkun chönsa*, vol.10, 187.

<sup>103</sup> "An Khe Pass Operation by the ROKs and Related Matters," VNCA.

<sup>104</sup> Che 1 kigabyöndae, "Ank'ep'aesü chakchön chönt'usangbo," HB00230.

<sup>105</sup> Letter from John P. Vann to Kang Won Chae, VNCA.

On 18 April, the Capital Division commander finally changed the operation to the regimental level. In the third phase from 19 to 26 April, ROKA conducted regimental level operations. Five companies from other regiments were ordered to reinforce the Cavalry Regiment. Under the regimental commander's command, the reinforced 1st Battalion would attack Hill 638, the 2d Battalion would attack the no-name hill, and the 3d Battalion would do a search and destroy operation along Highway 19.<sup>106</sup> The regiment's top priority was to occupy Hill 638. On 19 April, three companies started to assault the hill at the same time. However, when the 8th Company experienced five casualties, and the 3d Company had three wounded and two killed, they suspended the operation.<sup>107</sup> On that day, the ROKFV commander, General Lee, visited the battlefield with Vann and Dzu. According to Vann's report, Lee "talked vaguely about 2 plans to reinforce the top of the pass and to sweep down the pass from the high ground."<sup>108</sup> Vann added that "this [plan] of course is what should have been done from the first day."<sup>109</sup> On 20 April, two companies initiated a frontal attack while the other two companies supported them in reserve. Before the attack, four F-4 fighters bombed around Hill 638, and artillery fired 104 rounds. After two hours, the 8th Company arrived close to the hill, but retreated after suffering three casualties during the charge to the top.<sup>110</sup> Cavalry Regimental commander Kim, who was watching the situation from Hill 600, was angry and ordered a renewed attack. In his testimony, Kim blamed his soldiers for their lack of fighting spirit and abandoning the battlefield.<sup>111</sup> However, when the 8th Company commander was killed and

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<sup>106</sup> Chung Tūk-man interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 782.

<sup>107</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awŏl han'gukkun chŏnsa*, vol.10, 191.

<sup>108</sup> Message from John Vann to Creighton Abrams, "Daily Commander's Evaluation," 19 April 1972, Folder 2, Box 24, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Kukpangbu, *P'awŏl han'gukkun chŏnsa*, vol.10, 191-192.

<sup>111</sup> Kim Ch'ang-yŏl interview, 22 October 1984, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 788.

twelve soldiers were wounded by enemy mortar fire during their second attack, the 1st Battalion commander Han had to stop the operation.<sup>112</sup>

The 1st Battalion resumed its attack on 22 April. While two companies would contain the enemy down the ridges, the 2d Company would launch a frontal attack. However, this plan did not go well either. ROK soldiers even tried rolling oil drums to the top to serve as barriers but failed because of the rough terrain. On this day, the 2d Company lost eleven soldiers. The 2d Company commander, Capt. Jin Moo-woong, explained why their attack failed: “When the soldier who was standing in the front fell down, the other soldiers retreated. I ordered the platoon leaders to continue attacking, but the soldiers did not respond.”<sup>113</sup> Vann reported the battle progress as following: “An Khe Pass is still blocked. The ROKs now has fourteen companies in the AO [area of operations]. Three companies partially took key Hill 638.”<sup>114</sup> At 18:15, the 1st Platoon leader, 1st Lt. Im Dong-chun, led his platoon for a charge. For the first time in this battle, his platoon reached the enemy’s first line of defence.<sup>115</sup> Im was killed, and subsequently became the most famous hero of this battle. In fact, although the regiment-sized troops operating in this area and five companies were used for the attack on Hill 638, the regimental commander could not infuse combat power into the main battle. Since the companies from other battalions and regiments were jumbled in this area, it caused considerable confusion in the chain of command. Moreover, commanders from the battalion commander to the division commander often interfered with each company’s combat orders. In addition, the rugged terrain complicated the ROKA’s attempts because the limited routes did not allow them to use various infantry

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<sup>112</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol.10, 192.

<sup>113</sup> Jin Moo-woong interview, *Chüngönül t’onghae pon pet’ünam chönjaenggwa han’gukkun*, vol.1, 793.

<sup>114</sup> Message from John Vann to Creighton Abrams, “Daily Commander’s Evaluation,” 22 April 1972, Folder 2, Box 24, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

<sup>115</sup> Kukpangbu, *P’awöl han’gukkun chönsa*, vol.10, 193.

tactics. A ranking formation, which is favorable to concentrate firepower, was impossible due to the terrain. Soldiers moved mainly by a column formation; they became easy targets of the enemies positioned on the hill and were ambushed by them in many places. As a result, soldiers were taken out of action one by one.

Finally, on 23 April, the regimental commander himself completed a large-scale attack plan. While three companies would contain the enemy from the front, two newly reinforced companies would assault the hill, the 4th Company from the west ridge and the 9th Company from the southeast valley. The next morning on 24 April, ROK artillery fired 1,289 rounds on Hill 638 as preparation fire from 4:00 to 6:00. Then ROK soldiers initiated an attack. The NVA's resistance was weak. The 3d Platoon of the 4th Company charged to the top of the hill and occupied the hill at 07:10.<sup>116</sup> 3d Platoon leader 1st Lt. Lee Mu-pyo said, "We advanced on the hill for a while and received enemy fire. One soldier was killed but I expected there were actually few enemies on the hill based on their defensive fire frequency. We kept moving to the top and charged the hill, but no one was there. It was like a miracle."<sup>117</sup> After the battle, 1st Lt. Lee received the *Taeguk* military merit and was deemed a hero for assembling an assault team of nine soldiers who courageously charged Hill 638. However, according to his interview in 1984, Lee denied his story, testifying that all members of his platoon charged the hill and thus he did not need to assemble an assault team. Also, Lee testified that the picture of him jumping over a rock during the battle was fabricated. A picture was taken after the battle in a similar spot.<sup>118</sup> Making Lee a hero implied that ROKA actually did not fight well in this battle. That is why they

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>117</sup> Lee Mu-pyo interview, 13 July 1984, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol. 1, 805.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

glorified it: for even though it was a tough battle, the Koreans won due to their soldiers' will and courage.<sup>119</sup>

After the occupation of Hill 638, the regiment continued the operation to reopen Highway 19. The 9th Company advanced behind the hill. At 15:00, two F-4 fighters launched twenty-four high explosives bombs in this area. Artillery fire continued. The 2d Battalion wiped out the NVA in the no-name hill area, and the 3d Battalion equipped with APCs kept conducting search operations along Highway 19 until 26 April. An Khe Pass and Highway 19 were finally reopened. A ROK Cavalry Regiment after-action report stated, "after halting the enemy attack, we completely destroyed the enemy by conducting counter-attack. This battle was a victory showing off Korean's combat power by killing 605 enemies and capturing seventy-one rifles and ten machine guns."<sup>120</sup>

From a military perspective, although the mission was accomplished, the Battle of An Khe Pass was a failed operation. First of all, the Koreans' practice in this battle was not in alignment with the following principles of war.<sup>121</sup> (1) Objective: Although the Koreans understood their tactical objective to repel the enemy from Hill 638 and to achieve the operational objective of opening Highway 19, they delayed their response. (2) Offensive: since

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<sup>119</sup> The ROK government was sensitive to public opinion about the withdrawal of ROK forces from Vietnam. If the Battle of An Khe Pass had been known to the public as a failure, Seoul would have faced an awkward situation.

<sup>120</sup> Che 1 kigabyönda, "Ank'ep'aesü chakchön chönt'usangbo," HB00230.

<sup>121</sup> The Principles of war provide general guidance for the conduct of war at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The U.S Army published its first discussion of the principles of war in Army training regulation in 1921, and after that, although the principles of war slightly revised, it has withstood the test of time. The current Korean Army version of the principle of war (2013) is almost the same with the US Army's 1993 and 2008 version, with little revision: adding the intelligence and morale, removing economy of force. FM 100-5 of 1993 and FM 3-0 of 2008 presented nine principles of objective, offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, and simplicity. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 100-5: Operations* (Washington D.C.: Department of Army, 14 June 1993), chapter 2, 4-6; Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-0: Operations* (Washington D.C.: Department of Army, 27 June 2008), chapter 4, 12-15. The analysis of the Battle of An Khe Pass is based on the principles of war presented the most recent ROKA Field Manual. Kyoyuk'oejang [Field Manual] 13-3-2: *Chakchönsul* [Operations] (Gyeryong: Yukgunbonbu [ROKA Headquarters], 30 April 2013).

they had a clear objective, ROKA should have conducted offensive action quickly, decisively, and effectively. However, because of the same pattern of daytime piecemeal attacks, ROKA was unable to seize the initiative against the defending enemy. (3) Intelligence: ROKA did not recognize the enemy presence before they were attacked by surprise and the road was blocked. And even after the Koreans knew the presence of the enemy, they did not have any information about the enemy size and type. (4) Unity of command: After the battle began to get into the spotlight, all the different levels of commanders interfered with the actual combat operation and caused confusion in the chain of command. Also, the command and control of the attached companies coming from different units was not effective. (5) Maneuver: ROKA employed the same pattern, time, and route against a stubborn enemy. Although rough terrain and lack of helicopter support could be used as excuses for this lack of initiative, ROKA commanders were responsible for their monotonous ineffective attacks. (6) Mass: ROKA failed to concentrate combat power, despite having overwhelming firepower and a superior number of troops. (7) Surprise: ROKA's attack was not creative and did not surprise the enemy. PAVN was well prepared and cognizant of the Koreans' plan of attack. It was the PAVN who had the element of surprise. (8) Security: ROKA's base kept being attacked and harassed by the enemy fire. Some combat troops were isolated without supplies since NVA had blocked the supply route. (9) Morale: The overall morale and military spirit of the Korean soldiers was low with the prospect of their future withdrawal. Moreover, as this battle progressed, their morale worsened because of the casualties of fellow soldiers, lack of supplies, and stress from the battlefield.

Fundamentally, the Koreans could not halt the enemy's operational purpose for this battle. The North Vietnamese Army had already withdrawn from Hill 638 during the ROK's large-scale operation. The North Vietnamese achieved their operational purpose by cutting off

the supply line for sixteen days, which was enough time for them to support their main forces' offensive against the ARVN II Corps. The Korean's large-scale operation was launched too late. From the pressure to occupy the hill quickly, continuous piecemeal attacks with one to three companies using the same route took place. However, these piecemeal operations only resulted in multiple casualties and brought criticism for the Koreans' inactivity from both the Americans and the South Vietnamese. The regimental commander explained these piecemeal attacks by saying that he had no more reserves to use, but if that was true, he should have waited until he was ready to launch a large-scale operation.<sup>122</sup> Koreans sent troops every day due to the pressure to occupy the hill quickly, but still they were too passive to launch a large-scale operation. The result of this combination of their passive attitude and the pressure to act quickly caused heavy casualties and led to a poor outcome. As a result, the ROK Army's battle for An Khe Pass neither frustrated the enemy's operational purpose nor minimized Korean sacrifices. This was an unexpected result for the Korean forces. The Battle of An Khe Pass was indeed a Pyrrhic victory.

During the battle, Koreans were not able to diffuse the allies' continued criticism of their lack of aggressiveness. Instead, mutual distrust was compounded by cultural and military friction between the Koreans, Americans, and South Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the Koreans' sacrifice in accomplishing their mission in this battle brought positive effects on the dynamics of the three countries' relationship in terms of the Korean troops' future retention. South Vietnam's governmental officials complimented the Koreans' contributions in this battle.<sup>123</sup> Maj. Gen. Kim Young-sun, the 9th Division commander, stated, "South Vietnamese people long for South Koreans to fight together. It is not only the people's expectation, but also the government and

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<sup>122</sup> Kim Ch'ang-yŏl interview, *Chŭngŏnŭl t'onghae pon pet'ŭnam chŏnjaenggwa han'gukkun*, vol.1, 788.

<sup>123</sup> "Chuwŏltaesagwan [South Vietnamese Embassy]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 10 June 1972.

ARVN's attitude and cooperation became much better [after the Battle of An Khe Pass]."<sup>124</sup> The result of this battle became a useful pretext for the U.S. to request ROK forces to expand their roles. In the U.S. National Security Council members' discussion about the Vietnam War on 26 April, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, reminded the members that the U.S. should at least compliment ROKA's "big" contribution in opening up Highway 19, saying that "the ROKs have gained the high ground at the An Khe Pass."<sup>125</sup> Participants all agreed to mention the Battle of An Khe Pass when the US requested the Korean forces to "get out of their enclaves and take over some of the activity in their portion of II Corps." Later on 3 June, President Nixon formally requested ROK President Park to send the Korean troops to open Kontum Pass with full U.S. support. Despite a month and a half long operation, the South Vietnamese had been bogged down in opening that particular pass.<sup>126</sup> In the U.S.'s view, the Korean's achievement at An Khe Pass stood out compared to the South Vietnamese forces' poor performance at the Kontum Pass. President Park replied that "I have decided to offer assistance of the Korean forces in the Kontum Pass operation," and the ROK 9th Division started the preparation in earnest for this "joint ROK-U.S. operation."<sup>127</sup>

However, on 16 June, the plan was canceled due to the South Vietnamese refusal; ARVN decided to open the pass by themselves without help from ROK. This case illuminated the complex relationship existing between the South Vietnamese, Americans, and Koreans in the Vietnamization phase. The actual military operation was connected to each countries' politics. The ROKFV commander, General Lee Se-ho, thought that the South Vietnamese worried about

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<sup>124</sup> Kim, *Paengmagojiŭi kwangyŏng*, 345.

<sup>125</sup> Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, "Vietnam," 26 April 1972, FRUS, Document 135.

<sup>126</sup> Letter from President Nixon to Korean President Park, 3 June 1972, FRUS, Document 144.

<sup>127</sup> Message from Philp Habib to Richard Nixon and Attached Letter, "President Park's Reply to President Nixon," 13 June 1972, Folder 14, Box 24, Dale W. Andrade Collection, VNCA.

losing their prestige if ROKA reopened the pass quickly, although militarily they needed the Koreans' help.<sup>128</sup> General Abrams was upset about this news, saying that he could not help but accept Saigon's decision, but this operation would still not be easy for ARVN.<sup>129</sup> In his letter to President Park, Lee wrote, "the Americans are appreciative and even apologetic to us. The South Vietnamese also express gratitude for our decision. By this, we achieved our goal without bleeding, and I as a ROKFV commander became blameless."<sup>130</sup> General Kim, the 9th Division commander, also stated, "We Koreans achieved an honorable position because of this [event]."<sup>131</sup> As a result, the Battle of An Khe Pass and the following ROK's decision to open Kontum Pass at least saved face for the Koreans and justified their continued presence in Vietnam in spite of the complex relationship with the U.S. and South Vietnam.

The Battle of An Khe Pass demonstrates that military decisions, cultural impediments, government to government or military command relations, and various leaders' political and military realities must all be considered in any final examination of a single contest, such as the one at An Khe Pass. Since each nation has its own priorities and perspectives on how to best achieve the goal, combined operations are difficult. Vietnamization was not a path to victory; rather, it was designed to facilitate the withdrawal of U.S. forces and start negotiations with North Vietnam. Vietnamization, therefore, did not optimize cooperation between the U.S., South Vietnamese, and the South Korean forces. As a result, even fighting in a single major engagement became a complex and layered endeavor rather than a purely militaristic

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<sup>128</sup> Lee, "Compilation of Speech, Instructions, and Directives (1969-1973)," 138.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>131</sup> Kim, *Paengmagojiŭi kwangyŏng*, 367.

confrontation. As demonstrated in this case, Americans, South Vietnamese, and Koreans were fighting different wars against the common enemy at different times during the Vietnam War.

## **Conclusion: Historical Memory and Its Implications for Geopolitics After the War**

The two army divisions, the main troops of the ROK forces (about 37,000), remained in Vietnam until early 1973, except for the ROK Marine Corps (about 11,000) which had already withdrawn between December 1971 and April 1972. Despite the U.S. and other allied forces' gradual withdrawal during Vietnamization, the Korean combat troops were stationed one or two years more than any other troops allied with South Vietnam, mainly based on their interest. The ROK government tried to keep pursuing economic benefits through friendly relations with South Vietnam, as well as expecting a leveraged role in maintaining the U.S.-ROK alliance and preventing U.S forces' further withdrawal from South Korea. However, the ROK troops could not stay any longer after the truce agreement, because the Paris Peace Treaty on 27 January 1973 called for the withdrawal of all U.S. and allied forces within sixty days.

This agreement finally ended their ten-year participation in the Vietnam War. The ROK forces started to withdraw after the peace treaty agreement. Based on the ROK Ministry of Defense's order for the withdrawal of all ROK units, the Korean forces began leaving Vietnam and completed their withdrawal on 23 March 1973. However, on the morning of 28 January, an hour earlier than the agreement was to have come into effect, four soldiers were killed, including the 1st Battalion commander of the White Horse 29th Regiment, Lt. Col. Yoo Jae-moon, and six were wounded. They were attacked by ambushed VC near the bridge when the Koreans came to check after hearing the news that VC demolished the bridge inside of the battalion's area. Another Korean troop who went to save the isolated soldiers suffered two casualties. Including

this bridge, three locations along the ROK White Horse 9th Division's main route for withdrawal were blocked by VC.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the peace treaty agreement, ROK forces' withdrawal was not smooth because of the continuous provocations by VC.<sup>2</sup> The division commander, Maj. Gen. Kim Young-sun faced a difficult situation. First, the lack of U.S. support. The U.S. forces who had supported the Korean operations refused an air and gunship support in addition to helicopter support for transportation. Second, the ROKFV commander, Lt. Gen. Lee Se-ho did not want the active operation to open the withdrawal route under consideration for avoiding additional casualties caused by the engagement with enemy forces. Yet, the division commander decided to attack the VC. The Koreans contributed to the opening of Highway 1 as a result from having four additional casualties.<sup>3</sup> The Korean troops could move to the airport to leave for South Korea on foot or by the air. Still, they were nervous during the withdrawal. Following that attack, in situations where an enemy might appear anywhere and anytime, one of the platoon leaders in the White Horse 29th Regiment, Lt. Seo Man-sik, stated his concern about the safety of his platoon before the final withdrawal. When he got the order of postponement of his troop, Seo was disappointed but encouraged his platoon to reconstruct the base once they had removed before the withdrawal.<sup>4</sup> At the end of January, against the continuing VC threat, the ROK minister of defense Yu Jae-hung sought to comfort the Korean public, that there would be no problem to finish the withdrawal within sixty days, saying, "despite the turbulent situation of South Vietnam even after the truce agreement, it would get better soon."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Young-sun, *Paengmagojiüi kwangyöng* [Glory of the White Horse Hill] (Seoul: P'albogwön, 1997). 445-447.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Ok-yöl, *Yöllum* [The Man with Passion] (Seoul: Haengbok'an enöji, 2016), 342.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 446-468.

<sup>4</sup> Capt. Seo Man-shik, "Ch'ölsujakchönsogo [Looking back on the Withdrawal Operation]," *Ch'usöng*, no.33 (1977), 400-402.

<sup>5</sup> "Wöllamsat'ae kot hojön [Improvement in the Situation of Vietnam Soon]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 31 January 1973.

At the end of the twists and turns, the troops stepped on their own land in piecemeal. However, the Korean army's struggle during their final withdrawal seemed to imply the peace in Vietnam would not come easily. Despite the peace treaty, the North Vietnamese and VC's will to fight was not changed at all. Their struggle during the withdrawal also implied that the exit was not easier than the entrance. Although it was a war to support South Vietnamese based on the official dispatch request from Saigon, the real incentive of the Koreans' participation was related to the United States. Because their conduct in the war was supported by the U.S. forces, in their withdrawal after the ceasefire, the Koreans once again realized their vulnerability without U.S. support.

The Korean government portrayed their return as a triumph. Korean people welcomed homecoming soldiers. However, soon after their withdrawal, this portrayal was completely broken. Even after the ceasefire and the withdrawal of foreign troops, peace would never come to Vietnam. Paradoxically, their thirty years of war, including the first and second Indochina War from 1946 to 1975, ended with the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. After the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the VC violated the peace treaty and advanced to the South, the government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) collapsed. South Vietnam faded into history.

The fall of South Vietnam by the invasion of the North was shocking news to South Korea.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it was the moment that South Koreans started to forget their participation in the Vietnam War. Since then, the official cause of entering the war, which was to support South Vietnam, had vanished. In their acknowledgment, their withdrawal could no longer be the

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<sup>6</sup> "Chisangŭi yŏnok t't ... Ulbujinnŭn pet'ŭnam [purgatory of ground ... howling Vietnam]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 19 April 1975. Meanwhile, South Korea also embraced some of the refugees from South Vietnam. As many as 329 (later became 584) stayed in Busan, South Korea. "P'inanmin ch'ŏlsusŏn pusane," [The Refugee Evacuation ship arrived in Busan]," *Dong-a Ilbo*, 13 May 1975.

“honorable” withdrawal. At the same time, they could not be proud of their internal motivation of participation for the money and actual economic benefits they had during the war because it was selfish and immoral. Accordingly, combined with South Korea’s consequent political situation that the public had a more negative view on the decision of an authoritative military regime’s policy including participation in the war, the Vietnam War came to be South Korea’s own forgotten war.

Apart from this, however, the war has not been forgotten especially for those who participated in it. The memory of war veterans is not forgotten. Also, as many of them grow old or die, more and more memoirs and autobiographies based on their experience in Vietnam are going out into the world. Regardless of their diverse motives for participation at that time, the identity of war veterans today is consistent with their sacrifice and contribution to their own country. Sociologist Yun Ch'ung-no analyzed how the war veteran came to be conservative and claiming their legitimacy, arguing “we should not ignore that their identity has been shaped based on the social oblivion about their scars of the war.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, their identity, playing a legitimate role for their participation, shows their pride that the country has developed due to their sacrifice during the war.

This identity, however, has been alienated from society. Moreover, about half of the veterans, are estimated to be victims of Agent Orange, and about 50,000 are still suffering from the ill effects.<sup>8</sup> Since they had to send 80-90% of their combat pay to the government during their

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<sup>7</sup> Yun Ch'ung-no, *Pet'ŭnamjŏnjaenggwa han'guksahoesa* [The Vietnam War and the Korean Social History] (Seoul: Parŭnyŏksa, 2015), 317. Based on interviewing the participants of the Vietnam War, Yoon attempts to reconstruct the Korean society’s experience related to their participation in the Vietnam War. His work is topical in terms of generating war veterans’ memory of their participation in Vietnam.

<sup>8</sup> “Pohundaesangjahyŏnhwang [The Current State of Veterans],” e-Statistics Korea.

[http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx\\_cd=1561](http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=1561) (accessed 18 January 2020).

service, the veterans do not feel like their sacrifice is well paid from the government.<sup>9</sup> The real problem stemmed from the gap between the memories of veterans and society. Korean society has not embraced the veterans' posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), treating them as beneficiaries of the war in terms of their earning financial incentives. More fundamentally, the socio-economic generational gap worsened this problem: today's generation of South Korea does not have the same memory about wide-spread poverty and the efforts to overcome it that their parents and grandparents had during the 1960s and 1970s. The Vietnam War veterans are the last generation of soldiers who actually fought in the "real" war. While they stay here to tell their stories, a collaboration between scholars and veterans at all levels is needed to link the veterans' experience and historical memories with the history of South Korea's participation and conduct in the Vietnam War.

Although the ROK military played the main role in the conduct of the war, the Vietnam War also became forgotten for them. The ROK military, both the Army and Marine Corps, did not learn from their experiences in Vietnam. Their numerous operations and battles have not received serious attention from the ROK military. ROK Army used their experience as troop information and education to the soldiers to boost up the military spirits by praising their sacrifices for the victories. Their understanding was confined to unconventional warfare, as many beginning and mid-level officers who had experienced the war moved to the next position in the special forces or its educational institution dealing with unconventional warfare. Most of all, their unconventional operational and tactical doctrine used in the Vietnam War were considered as of marginal value to the ROK military because they had to prepare for the conventional warfare against North Korea in the system of the U.S.-ROK mutual defense. As a

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<sup>9</sup> "Ch'amjönyongsaenge chönt'usudang mot chunda [The Government Cannot Pay the Combat Duty Pay for the Veterans]," *JoongAng Ilbo*, 26 October 2015. <https://news.joins.com/article/18931940> (accessed 20 January 2020)

result, even though it is the only actual fight since the Korean War, their conduct in Vietnam came to be worthless.

Nevertheless, research to analyze and evaluate their conduct in the Vietnam War is necessary for the ROK military. In particular, their conduct in Vietnam gives unique implication to the ROK military for today and the future. The U.S. has been the most important ally of South Korea and has been a primary source of the knowledge and doctrine of the ROK military for more than half a century after World War II. The ROK forces have uncritically patterned themselves after the U.S. forces. However, the ROK forces should not simply emulate the U.S. forces due to their different situation: financial situation, geopolitical location, and culture, etc. In fact, these elements make it unfeasible to be the same army with the United States in the future.

As discussed in the dissertation, ROK forces had already had an experience of conducting the different style of war at the same time cooperating with the U.S. forces in Vietnam. The ROK forces in Vietnam designed different conduct from the U.S. forces, based on their different political considerations as well as not having the same level of firepower and mobility with the U.S. forces. Even if the ROK military needed to have a strong understanding of the U.S. military doctrine for the joint operation, it did not have to uncritically adopt the U.S. military system and doctrines like today. The ROK forces need to establish their own strategic, operational, tactical concept for the conduct of war and develop its capability under the close relationship with the U.S. forces. This is especially important because the Koreans have to lead a war situation as they soon take over the wartime Operational Control (OPCON) from the U.S. forces.

Moreover, the Koreans' most recent hybrid warfare experience in Vietnam should receive a spotlight from a future war against North Korea. Many experts expect the aspect of the future

war on the Korean Peninsula to be a hybrid war.<sup>10</sup> North Korea's hybrid threat has already started: the sinking of the ROK Navy corvette Cheonan by the North Korean midget submarine in March 2010, and North Korea's bombardment of Yeonpyeong island on 23 November 2010, as well as its continuing nuclear, biological, irregular, and cyber threat. Also, assuming North Korea's collapse, ROK forces would face North Korean rebellion by remaining forces or people in control of the region. Because North Koreans have become and will be more and more different entities having different cultures from South Koreans, the South Korean military should prepare for counterinsurgency or stabilizing operations against North Korea. As a result, their most recent experiences of pacification in Vietnam would be valuable lessons for the ROK forces.

The longstanding U.S.-South Korea alliance is facing a new challenge today. Superficially, the U.S. and South Korea have conflicted burden-sharing negotiations over hosting the U.S. military forces in South Korea, as U.S. President Donald Trump demanded a fivefold funding increase. More fundamentally, South Korea faces the predictable structural change surrounding it: the declining U.S. influence and the current U.S. government's "America First" foreign policy, and at the same time, China's rise and its increasing influence in the region. This change is challenging for South Korea since it is between the two superpowers. In this context, against the question of what will be the future relations between the U.S. and South Korea, the Korean public opinion is divided: One fears abandonment of the alliances and the other argues for seeking a more autonomous way in the relationship with the U.S., being cautious of heavy reliance. Regardless of these disagreements, Koreans generally want to keep the U.S.-ROK

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<sup>10</sup> Song Yun-seon, "Mirae anbohwan'gyōngūi pyōnhwawa yukkunūi hyōkshinjōllyak: Yukkunbijōn 2050 [The Changes in the Conditions of National Security in the Future and the Strategy of Korea Army Innovation: Army Vision 2050]," *Miraeyōn'gu* [Study of Future] 4, no.2 (2019), 139-140.

alliance. South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War suggests many implications in the diplomatic and political relations of the two countries.

At first, their relationship during the Vietnam War proved that mutual benefit is the basis of the alliance. In fact, the U.S.-ROK relationship during the Vietnam War was the most dynamic in their alliance history. They had a "honeymoon" relationship during the first half because their interests met each other: the U.S. wanted the boots on the ground, and the Koreans wanted corresponding incentives. However, it turned into conflict during the last half of the war. Based on the Nixon doctrine, the U.S. pulled out one army division from South Korea and reduced economic and military aid. It was the moment that ROK President Park Chung-hee started to call for self-defense, strengthening the military and developing nuclear weapons from the fear of abandonment by the United States.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the Koreans' participation in Vietnam prevented further U.S. forces' withdrawal and played a leveraged role in the relationship with Washington. At least South Korea did not meet the fate of Taiwan's abandonment by the U.S. after U.S. President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972.

Militarily, the South Koreans' achievement in their relations with the U.S. forces during the Vietnam War did not apply to the change in the overall relationship between the U.S. and ROK military in South Korea. Although there existed an opinion in South Korea to take over OPCON in order to conduct unilateral retaliation against North Korea's military provocations, the U.S.'s exercise of OPCON over ROK forces did not become an issue during the war. ROKFV's autonomous OPCON during the Vietnam War was taken as a unique case of both a militarily as well as politically unique situation of the Vietnam War, based on the belief that a possible future war in Korea would be different from the one in Vietnam. Moreover, fear of

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<sup>11</sup> "Han'guk, Tokchajök Haengnüngnyök Kaebal [South Korea, Developing Nuclear Weapon]," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 13 June 1975;

abandonment from the U.S. began to grow among Koreans amid Washington's disengagement policy during the 1970s. The U.S. forces' OPCON over entire ROK forces, intended as well as unintended, became the symbol of the U.S.-ROK alliance for South Koreans.

There have been changes in OPCON over South Korean forces since the late 1970s. The two forces built the Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978, allowing the Korean military to be partially involved in exercising operations, and South Korea took over peacetime OPCON in 1994. Today, if war or military contingency occurs on the Korean Peninsula, all South Korean forces will be placed under OPCON of a U.S. general, the commander of the CFC. Taking over wartime OPCON in 1994 was canceled due to the North Korean nuclear crisis. The takeover negotiation started in 2006, and the transition was delayed to 2012 which was initially planned for 2007. In 2011, it was again delayed to 2015 amid questions about South Korea's readiness without U.S. support. In October 2014, the U.S. and South Korea again agreed to delay ROK's takeover of OPCON while it was postponed indefinitely until ROK forces could respond to a nuclear or a missile attack by North Korea.<sup>12</sup> In November 2018, the U.S. and South Korea agreed to transit the wartime OPCON to South Korea and retain the combined command while reversing the command hierarchy where a ROK general becomes the commander and a U.S. general becomes his deputy.<sup>13</sup> If realized, this would be also a historical event, because the U.S. forces would be under a non-U.S. forces' OPCON for the first time after World War II.

OPCON has become a controversial political issue in South Korea during the 21st Century regarding their relations with the U.S. Some criticize that the current OPCON continues

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<sup>12</sup> "Is South Korea ready to take over control of troops on peninsula?," *Stars And Stripes*, 9 October 2014. <http://www.stripes.com/news/is-south-korea-ready-to-take-over-control-of-troops-on-peninsula-1.307405> (accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>13</sup> "South Korea could soon take control of its own wartime operations from the US," *DefenseNews*, 1 November 2018. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2018/11/01/the-wartime-control-of-us-south-korean-troops-on-the-peninsula-is-evolving/> (accessed 27 February 2019).

to make South Korea subordinate to the U.S. and therefore needs to be more self-reliant, while others argue that U.S. OPCON over ROK forces guarantees the retention of USFK and the alliance. The relationship between the U.S. and ROK forces during the Vietnam War suggests some prospects for the two countries' relationship regarding the current OPCON issue, that OPCON cannot be the essence of the alliance. There is always the possibility of change in the two countries' relationship, as the alliance could be strengthened or weakened based on their mutual interests. Although the U.S. forces did not exercise OPCON over ROK forces in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, the cooperative relationship between the two forces led to a more viable and overall more positive U.S.-ROK alliance. Both the U.S. and South Korea achieved their major intentions: the U.S. gained actual boots on the ground, whereas South Korea gained the respective economic, political and military benefits in addition to asserting its own national sovereignty. At the very least, South Koreans should know that the transition of OPCON does not necessarily mean a weakening of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Rather, it should be considered a strategy for Korea to survive in the tough geopolitical condition, as they managed to do it in the difficult conditions of Vietnam. Overall, a sound long-term strategy is required for South Korea to survive in the new cold war era of East Asia, as they survived and developed their country based on their efforts during the participation in Vietnam.

This forgotten war continues to impact historical memory in Vietnam and South Korea. On 23 March 2018, South Korean President Moon Jae-in expressed his regrets concerning massacres of Vietnamese civilians by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War, during his summit with Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang, in Hanoi. He said, "While we continue to develop exemplary bilateral cooperation between our two countries, I express my sincere regrets

concerning our unfortunate recent history that remains in our minds.”<sup>14</sup> Two former Korean presidents had also already expressed their regrets concerning the painful history between South Korea and Vietnam. In 2004 during his visit to Vietnam, former President Roh Moo-hyun said that “Korea holds a debt in its heart to Vietnam.”<sup>15</sup> Before that, former President Kim Dae-jung expressed his feelings in a summit with the then Vietnamese leader Tran Duc Luong who visited Korea in August 2001, saying that he was sorry for Korea’s participation in an unfortunate war and for unintentionally creating pain for the people of Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> This was the first time for the Korean president to express regrets for their participation.

These Korean presidents’ apologies have some implications. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries in 1992, South Korea has invested aggressively in Vietnam especially in the 21st Century, considering Vietnam as the most important economic partner in Southeast Asia. After the two countries signed a free trade agreement in December 2014, the total amount of the trade has doubled in five years. In 2017, South Korea shared the second largest of the Vietnamese market by 22.14%, after China who occupied 27.58%.<sup>17</sup> Above economic exchanges, cultural exchange between the two countries is highly active. Hallyu (the Korean wave) is sweeping Vietnam, and according to one survey, over 70% of Vietnamese have an affinity for Koreans.<sup>18</sup> It is no coincidence that *Park Hang-seo*, the Korean head coach of

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<sup>14</sup> “President Moon regrets unfortunate history between Korea, Vietnam,” *Korea.net*, 24 March 2018. <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/History/view?articleId=156348> (accessed 26 February 2020). This is not his first time expression of apology since taking office, in November 2017 President Moon sent a video message that “Korea has a debt of heart to Vietnam,” at the Ho Chi Minh City-Gyeongju World Culture Expo 2017. “Moon’s apology ignored in Vietnam,” *The Korea Times*, 15 November 2017. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/11/120\\_239305.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/11/120_239305.html) (accessed 26 February 2020).

<sup>15</sup> “President Moon regrets unfortunate history between Korea, Vietnam,” *Korea.net*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “2019 Pet’ünamjinch’ul chölllyak [2019 Strategy to the Vietnamese Market],” Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) document 19-029, 15 January 2019, 39. <http://news.kotra.or.kr/user/globalBbs/kotranews/788/globalBbsDataView.do?setIdx=252&dataIdx=172303&searchNationCd=101084> (accessed 24 February 2020).

<sup>18</sup> “Pet’ünamsö kösen hallyu yölp’un [Korean culture sweeps Vietnam],” *Yonhapnews*, 12 May 2019. <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20190512018800084> (accessed 24 February 2020).

the *Vietnam national* football team, became the national hero of Vietnam as he has taken the team to historic victories for two years.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, although this marriage is primarily purchased one, the Vietnamese bride makes up the overwhelming number of international couples in South Korea. In 2018, 6,338 Vietnamese brides married Korean grooms, which was the same number as all other countries' brides combined.<sup>20</sup> This symbolizes the cultural connection between the two countries.

Although South Korea's main motivation for the Vietnam war was based on relations with the U.S., future work on this topic would be also based on establishing relations with Vietnam. South Korea's participation and its conduct in Vietnam has now another meaning in terms of its focusing on building a close relationship with Vietnam. South Korea seeks a future-oriented relationship with Vietnam. In fact, Vietnam and Korea have many similarities in their history. Both shared the history of their long-time struggle to maintain an independent state against China's influence. They also had the colonial experience and the division of the countries after WWII. Both suffered from a civil war where the outside forces were deeply involved. In comparison with Vietnam, who eventually unified after the war, Korea is still in the pain of division. In fact, South Korea attempted to build a strategic relationship with South Vietnam based on the anti-communist block. Both Rhee Syng-man and Park Chung-hee wanted to build Asian People's Anti-communist league, where South Korea would play a leading role, but they were unsuccessful with the lack of U.S. support. It is uncertain whether Vietnam and South

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<sup>19</sup> "Vietnam's resurgence and the Park Hang-seo fairy tale," *VnExpress*, 24 October 2019. <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/sports/football/vietnam-s-resurgence-and-the-park-hang-seo-fairy-tale-4001007.html> (accessed 24 February 2020).

<sup>20</sup> "Statistics of International Marriage," Statistics Korea, 9 September 2019. [http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx\\_cd=2430](http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=2430) (accessed 24 February 2020).

Korea can build a relationship beyond economic partnership, but it is hard to deny they need to overcome the shared Vietnam War memories in order to proceed further relationship.

The joint memory of Vietnam and South Korea during the Vietnam War is not pleasant. When the Korean president expressed apology, the Vietnamese counterpart expressed that there would be no more need for apology, and then said, “Korea will make more efforts to heal the wounds of the past, solidify our bilateral friendship, and strengthen cooperation for prosperous co-existence.”<sup>21</sup> Because North Vietnamese won the war and unified the country over South Vietnam, Koreans participation along with South Vietnam might be meaningless for them today. It is also related to the Vietnamese pride of a victorious country. Indeed, the memory of the Vietnam War is receding from an overwhelmingly young Vietnamese society. Currently, among the 98 million people, about 60% are under the age of 30, and 75% were born after 1975.<sup>22</sup> Yet, they, especially the victims of the war, want some sincere apology from South Korea. If South Korea wants to build a future-oriented relationship with Vietnam, paradoxically, collaboration on the history of their involvement in Vietnam with Vietnamese scholars and people is required. Many past problems including the Koreans’ massacre have been reproduced or being ignored because of political consideration and a lack of historical studies.

A bigger problem of this issue reverts to South Korea’s internal understanding and evaluation of their participation. South Korean presidents who have expressed the regrets or apology are liberal. Conservative presidents did not or could not do the same action. Generally, the conservatives view their participation as an achievement of South Korea and President Park Chung-hee to develop the country in return for the benefits from the United States. Since the

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<sup>21</sup> “President Moon regrets unfortunate history between Korea, Vietnam,” *Korea.net*.

<sup>22</sup> “The World Factbook,” Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 7 February 2020.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html> (accessed 24 February 2020).

Vietnam War should have been a good war for the Koreans, the alleged deaths of an estimated 5,000 Vietnamese civilians have been taboo for decades. Even though the war in Vietnam is forgotten in South Korea, the evaluation of their participation in Vietnam is divided in terms of “good war” or “bad war.” Because of the lack of study, the disparity has further widened, and the conflict has been politicized. This is one of the reasons that more and more historical research is required to explore what had happened during their participation in Vietnam.

By exploring and understanding the past, the study of South Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War pursues the future. Thus, this study should move toward building a common historical memory for both countries. The issue of the massacre and atrocities of South Korean troops, which is the main obstacle for the two countries’ relationship, must be understood and studied in the context of the history of South Koreans’ conduct in Vietnam, beyond some of the media’s speculative reporting and exaggeration or a complete negation of the fact. In that sense, it is necessary to understand how and why the ROK forces fought in the Vietnam War under what kind of relationship with the U.S. and Vietnamese troops or people. I hope this study can contribute to building the two countries’ future-oriented partnership.

In this respect, I have to admit the limitation of this dissertation for future development. Although the study was based on the vast research from the U.S. and South Korean archives, further research is required, for example, to embrace the memory of the war participants. In particular, because of its controversy, especially at the estimation of the ROK forces’ pacification, cross-examination using different sources, a case study in the specific region, and collaborative work of the U.S., Vietnamese, and Korean scholars, is required. The most important here is how to reflect on the Vietnamese view of this topic. Despite reflecting their view through indirect sources, the absence of the Vietnamese perspective on the Koreans in

Vietnam is a major weakness of this dissertation. It is also essential to understand the Vietnamese perspective on the Koreans in Vietnam not only for this historical research but also for the future relationship between Vietnam and South Korea.

By reexamining and illustrating the causes, actions, and deeds of Korean soldiers in South Vietnam, this dissertation intends to re-open fresh deliberations on this war. I draw attention to Korean participation in the Vietnam War, which soon became an altogether “Forgotten War.” This dissertation attempts to present a new and different perspective to the existing historiography of this war. It advances both orthodox and revisionist arguments.<sup>23</sup> Much

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<sup>23</sup> The topic of the Vietnam War has been debated by the orthodox versus revisionist dichotomy over a long time. Although the war was over in 1975; the war is not ended in the historiographical debate. Broadly, the orthodox school’s view is that the American involvement in the Vietnam War was wrongheaded and unjust. The U.S. started the war that could be won. See: David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam during the Kennedy Era* (New York: Knopf, 1988); Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991); James S. Olson and Randy Robert, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1995* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996); George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996); David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origin of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*; Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s War: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford Press, 2000); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Revisionists argue against the orthodox by claiming that the war was necessary for the United States. Also, they debunk the myth of an unwinnable war in Vietnam. Some pro-revisionist scholars even do not want to admit the defeat in Vietnam, such as an argument that it was not the military, but the U.S. government that misled the conduct of the Vietnam War. See: William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976); Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978); Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (California: Presidio Press, 1983); Michael Lind, *The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999); H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Meanwhile, starting from arguing against Lewis Sorley’s “better war” myth, Gregory Daddis debunks the revisionist view based on U.S. Army’s conduct in the Vietnam War: Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); — *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years In Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). More recently, historical work other than the U.S. perspective has been coming out. This work is based on Vietnamese and Chinese perspective using their sources. See: Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence, KS: University Press

of the existing literature regarding the war has been dominated by American perspectives based on U.S. produced documents. Furthermore, this dissertation depicts an alternative account of the Korean contributions and sacrifices, which have all too easily been forgotten and ignored. Much or at least a great deal of what has been written and debated to date about this war relates to U.S. actions, politics, strategies, and reactions as well as South and North Vietnamese perceptions and accounts, ignoring almost all Korean contributions and even failing to note the substantial Korean contribution and efforts.

Thus, it is the purpose of this dissertation to encourage a broader re-examination of the Vietnam War. Focusing on what influenced the South Korean motives in the war, this dissertation examines what kind of role Korean culture, politics, and relationship to the U.S. played. This dissertation, moreover, places more emphasis on how much the thinking and perceptions of Koreans, including President Park and commanders in chief in Vietnam, influenced the Korean strategies, operational concept, and tactics in the Vietnam War. By struggling to find a balance between pursuing the allied cause and national interest, the ROK forces tried to solve this dilemma throughout their entire participation. It was the ROK Army that enacted and realized the South Korean government policy. Participation and conduct in Vietnam were true “politics by other means” for South Korea and the South Korean military. I hope that this study would not only be a starting point for further research towards a big topic of the Koreans in Vietnam but also be a cornerstone of a broad understanding of the nature of the Vietnam War.

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