

IN PURSUIT OF “SELF-RELIANT NATIONAL DEFENSE:” SOUTH KOREA’S STRATEGIC CATCH-UP UNDER PARK CHUNG-HEE, 1962-1979

Angus MacKellar, University of Toronto

Throughout his tenure (1962–1979), South Korean President Park Chung-hee rallied the country with his intuitive slogan of “rich nation, strong army.”¹ If the Republic of Korea (ROK) today meets both criteria, in 1953 it had neither; Seoul began the Korean War with a calamitous display of military inferiority in the summer of 1950 and emerged from the war in worse economic shape than North Korea, a condition that persisted throughout the decade.² Assuming the presidency in 1962, Park overturned this disparity in spectacular fashion, establishing what has become South Korea’s enduring conventional superiority over the North.³ This paper seeks to understand the driving forces behind South Korea’s strategic catch-up, investigating the nature of ROK economic and military growth under Park Chung-hee and ascertaining how important the policies and leadership of the Park regime were in that process.

First, this paper will define strategic catch-up and demonstrate its applicability to the Korean Peninsula, setting the boundaries for this paper and justifying its core realist assumptions. Secondly, it will analyze the militarized economic policies of the Park regime, understanding “rich nation, strong army”

- 1 Peter Banseok Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation: the Defense Industry and the Building of Modern Korea Under Park Chung Hee*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2024), 61-62.
- 2 Yong-Pyo Hong, “North Korea in the 1950s: The Post Korean War Policies and Their Implications,” *The Korean Journal of International Relations* 44, no. 5 (2004): 222-224, PDF, https://www.kjis.org/journal/download_pdf.php?spage=215&volume=2&number=1; William C. Martel, *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Strategy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 158-159, https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106886834506196.
- 3 The justification for this claim will be outlined in the first two sections of this paper. The first section will outline the economic aspect of ROK superiority, and the second section will describe the Military Industrial Complex that accompanied these economic gains. In the first section, moreover, the concept of strategic catch-up will be defined to make the relative strategic positions of North and South Korea clear.

as a formula for “self-reliant national defense” and highlighting the extensive personal agency of Park himself to reveal the endogenous roots of ROK strategic catch-up. Lastly, this paper will address a key alternative explanation for South Korea’s strategic catch-up, the US-ROK relationship during the Vietnam War, dismissing the notion that Seoul’s relative strategic gains against Pyongyang were exogenously driven. Ultimately, this paper finds that Park himself was the principal driver of South Korea’s growing strategic capabilities, relative to the North, and that exogenous factors do not refute this claim.

Defining and Applying Strategic Catch-up in Realist Perspective

One can reasonably contest the concept of strategic catch-up, both in theory and in its application to the balance of power between Seoul and Pyongyang, as there is no standardized metric for measuring relative strategic capabilities in Korea or elsewhere. It is therefore necessary to define this term before employing it as the basis of this paper’s analysis. For the purposes of this essay, strategic catch-up is a phenomenon by which a state reduces or reverses an initial position of strategic inferiority in relation to another state (or states).

While strategic catch-up is conceptually derived from economic catch-up, it is a more nebulous concept that cannot be truly tested except in the event of war between the concerned parties. Nevertheless, metrics of economic catch-up, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), remain of key importance when assessing strategic capabilities. General measures of economic health, like GDP, denote an economy’s ability to produce goods and services; more specific measurements of a country’s industrial composition reveal the applicability of this economic power to military production. Subsequent sections of this paper will discuss the qualitative characteristics of industrialization

under Park. These qualitative considerations distinguish strategic catch-up from its economic counterpart, as similar economic resources may be employed differently and thus yield divergent strategic outcomes. In this case, strategy supersedes capability.

Following the 1953 armistice, North Korea pulled ahead on both accounts. Pyongyang pursued what appears to have been a more effective economic strategy than Seoul and, as a result, looked most capable of independently maintaining a modern army. By 1959, North Korea's GDP per capita was estimated to be approximately 73 percent higher than South Korea's, with this growth concentrated in heavy industrial output.⁴ Whereas South Korean President Syngman Rhee focused on numerical superiority (in active personnel) over the North in the short term, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung prioritized economic investment over military spending until 1960.⁵ While both Rhee and Kim's strategies were funded by foreign aid, Pyongyang's strategy was one of nurturing greater self-reliance, fostering one-to-one economic and strategic superiority over South Korea.⁶ A resumption of the Korean War may have vindicated Rhee's strategy, as Kim foresaw, US opposition to a ROK offensive instead maintained an uneasy truce.⁷

Scholarly comparisons of the two Korean economies are therefore centered on when, not if, South Korea reversed an initial disadvantage vis-à-vis the North. While North Korean historical statistics range from unreliable to nonexistent, conser-

4 Hong, "Post Korean War Policies," 222-224.

5 Hong, "Post Korean War Policies," 225-226, 231.

6 Under President Rhee (1948-1960), over half of the ROK's military expenditure and as much as 40 percent of Seoul's total budget was directly bankrolled by Washington. Peter Banseok Kwon, "Defender of the Nation, Champion of Science: The Agency for Defense Development as a Nexus for the Technological Transformation of South Korea," *Journal of Korean Studies* 28, no. 1 (2023): 62, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07311613-10213182>; Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, (Columbia University Press, 2018), 24, <https://books-scholarsportal-info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/uri/ebooks/ebooks6/degruyter6/2021-09-08/5/9780231546188>; Duol Kim, "The Great Divergence on the Korean Peninsula (1910-2020)," *Australian Economic History Review* 61, no. 3 (September 28, 2021): 329, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeht.12225>; Hong, "Post Korean War Policies," 222.

7 Hong, "Post Korean War Policies," 218.

vative economic estimates indicate that South Korea narrowed the gap by the 1970s and reversed it from the 1980s onwards.⁸ In order to prove that *strategic* catch-up occurred in the Korean Peninsula, very simple criteria must be met. Firstly, (in this case) South Korea must have been strategically inferior to the North. Secondly, at some point in the future, this disadvantage must have been reduced, if not overturned. The first criterion was satisfied at the start of the Korean War and seems to have endured for at least a decade. This paper’s analysis of the strategic implications of Park Chung-hee’s presidency will complement the academic consensus on comparative North and South Korean macroeconomics, ultimately satisfying the second criterion.

Lastly, for this section, it is necessary to acknowledge and justify this paper’s realist assumptions. The one-to-one comparison of Seoul and Pyongyang’s strategic positions implicitly ignores direct intervention from allies on either side, in keeping with realist assumptions that states are purely egoistic and that only self-ensured security is reliable.⁹ Firstly, this perspective is analytically useful and prevents the overextension of this paper’s scope. A comprehensive analysis of prospective American, Chinese, United Nations, and Soviet intervention would be mired in the internal politics of these actors and global geopolitics, beyond this paper’s scope. Secondly, Park’s explicit realist perspective was appropriately rooted in contemporary reality. In 1969, for example, President Nixon agreed with Park’s call for “self-reliant national defense” when he instructed Washington’s Asian allies to take responsibility for their own

8 See, for example, Myung-soo Cha et al., *Historical Statistics of Korea*, (Singapore: Springer, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3874-2>; Kim, “The Great Divergence,” 325, 329-330; See also, for example, Byung-Yeon Kim et al., “Assessing the economic performance of North Korea, 1954-1989: estimates and growth accounting analysis,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 35, no. 3 (2007): 564–582; Eui-gak Hwang, *The Korean economies: A Comparison of North and South*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

9 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 133-134, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.scpo.idm.oclc.org/lib/sciences-po/reader.action?docID=5508355&ppg=149>.

protection.¹⁰ The subsequent withdrawal of 20,000 US troops from South Korea in 1971 and President Carter’s aborted total withdrawal in 1977 clearly vindicate Park’s reasoning.¹¹ The realist lens adopted by this paper, therefore, is both analytically and empirically appropriate.

“Rich Nation, Strong Army” as a Formula for Strategic Catch-up

Faced with the need for “self-reliant national defense,” Park adopted a series of policies under his overarching strategy of “rich nation, strong army.”¹² As explained in the previous section, the impact of economic strength on strategic capability is intuitively positive. One reading of Park’s slogan may interpret “strong army” as being contingent on the independent variable, “rich nation.” Analysis of Park’s policies, however, demonstrates that this formula was not a purely quantitative matter of cause and effect. Instead, the core of the “rich nation, strong army” idea lies in the *qualitative* characteristics of ROK economic expansion, as directed by Park himself, thereby revealing the fundamentally endogenous nature of South Korea’s strategic catch-up. To this effect, Park ensured that the specificities of ROK economic growth would directly augment Seoul’s military capabilities, orchestrating the creation of an economic system that inextricably linked the ideas of “rich nation, strong army” into a single strategic goal.

To best understand the characteristics of Park’s national economy, and thus their qualitative importance, one must first

10 Office of the Historian, 29. Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 29, Seoul, December 21, 1964. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus/1964-68v29p1/d29>; Snyder, *Korea at the Crossroads*, 21.

11 Richard F. Doner, *The Politics of Uneven Development: Thailand’s Economic Growth in Comparative Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 272, https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106288156406196; Joo-Hong Nam, *America’s Commitment to South Korea: The First Decade of the Nixon Doctrine*, LSE Monographs in International Studies, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 78, 101, 148, 159, https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106632992606196.

12 Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 61–63.

understand the man himself. A high achiever in the Manchurian and Japanese military academies and a veteran of the Manchukuo Army, Park’s personal ideology was highly militaristic.¹³ Appointing his former classmates to cabinet positions, Park and his regime wholly embraced totalitarian Imperial Japanese ideologies as they crafted Seoul’s policies, leveraging Korea’s colonial and wartime experiences to garner support from a society now deeply conditioned by war.¹⁴ From an economic standpoint, this resulted in a peacetime system reminiscent of a 1940s war footing, engendering a militaristic sense of civic duty in the South Korean workforce as Park became the self-styled field marshal of the national economy.¹⁵ According to Park’s vision, the ROK’s strategic catch-up was therefore characterized by aggressive economic militarism.

With militarized economic growth forming the core of Park’s catch-up strategy, the first order of business was to achieve total control over his workforce. Over the 1960s, Park maintained a positive relationship with the national workforce and organized labor while at the same time restructuring labor laws to weaken unions and legalize greater state control of their activities.¹⁶ This authority was tested in 1969, when labor action in Busan posed a serious threat to Park’s growing privatization agenda, which aimed to augment the president’s control over the national economy by concentrating power in the hands of a small number of industrialists with whom Park would closely

13 Carter J. Eckert, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism 1866-1945*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 66-67, 81, https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991105918195606196; Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 48-49.

14 Eckert, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea*, 59, 65, 77, 83, 180-181; Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 14-15, 23-24, 48-49.

15 Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 14-15, 23-24. The description of Park as a “self-styled field marshal of the national economy” will be justified throughout this section.

16 Hwasook Nam, *Building Ships, Building a Nation: Korea’s Democratic Unionism Under Park Chung Hee*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009), 136-138, 155-159, 177, 184, https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991107433301806196.

collaborate.¹⁷ Despite widespread public sympathy for the strikers, Park's popularity amongst workers and union leaders allowed him to unilaterally suspend the strike and later dismantle South Korea's democratic labor laws with ease.¹⁸ This popularity ultimately empowered the total erasure of South Korea's democracy in 1972, when Park's legal powers became decidedly authoritarian under the Yushin Constitution.¹⁹

Park aimed to command not only the national workforce but also its industrialists, with his privatization agenda setting the stage for a highly centralized system in which he mobilized state resources and coercion to personally orchestrate the militarized development of the national economy. Between 1968 and 1972, for example, state directives enforced a two-to-one consumer-to-military output ratio for key manufacturers as well as total wartime convertibility.²⁰ Alongside this aggressive dual-use development program, Park employed carrot-and-stick tactics to enlist South Korea's most powerful private actors, the *chaebol*, in support of key initiatives such as his Heavy-Chemical Industry Drive (HCI).²¹ Seoul offered tax breaks and preferential loans for *chaebol* involved in South Korea's nascent Military Industrial Complex (MIC) and HCI, generating strong incentives for public-private coordination.²² Conversely, Park leveraged corruption charges and presidential pardons to coerce compliance from the likes of Samsung founder Lee Byung-chul.²³

By consolidating domestic economic resources and ben-

17 Nam, *Building a Nation*, 170-172, 177.

18 Nam, *Building a Nation*, 177-178, 184.

19 Nam, *Building a Nation*, 184; Hyug Baeg Im, "The Origins of the Yushin Regime: Machiavelli Unveiled" in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, edited by Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, 233-262, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013), 233-234, <https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.4159/harvard.9780674061064.e8>.

20 Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 65-66, 78-79.

21 The *chaebol* are large South Korean conglomerates, characterized by extensive market shares and horizontal business models. Many *chaebols* expand across a large number of sectors. Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 118.

22 Doner, *Politics of Uneven Development*, 267, 271; Kim, *The Great Divergence*, 326-327; Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 103, 117-118, 121.

23 Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 119.

efiting from state intervention, the *chaebol* were well positioned to compete internationally. From a strategic standpoint, this led to the accumulation of defense-specific human capital by South Korean scientists, engineers, and businessmen through US-subsidized projects across the Asia-Pacific.²⁴ Hyundai, for example, gained extensive technical expertise through a highly unprofitable venture in Thailand, the losses from which were partly offset by US, ROK, and World Bank funding.²⁵ This accumulation of MIC expertise by South Korean firms was no coincidence, nor was it charity from Washington; from 1965 to 1966, Park and top ROK officials leveraged the Vietnam War and normalization with Japan to overturn initial US refusals to grant South Korean firms preferential overseas procurement contracts.²⁶ Supporting the *chaebol* was, evidently, an explicit and effective policy of the Seoul government.

While the accumulation of MIC human capital was government policy, its application was Park’s alone. Empowering the *chaebol* extended Park’s personal control over HCI and MIC development beyond the letter of the law, with key initiatives being conducted on a president-to-CEO basis.²⁷ The undemocratic nature of Park’s strategy (predating the 1972 reforms) is best characterized by the activities of the Agency for Defense Development (ADD), which managed the indigenization of Seoul’s research and development (R&D) program from 1970 onwards.²⁸ The ADD was both state-funded and privately in-

24 Jim Glassman and Young-Jin Choi, “The Chaebol and the US Military-Industrial Complex: Cold War Geopolitical Economy and South Korean Industrialization,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 46, no. 5 (May 1, 2014): 1164, 1168-1171, doi:10.1068/a130025p.

25 Glassman and Choi, “Chaebol and the US,” 1168-1169.

26 A comprehensive citation would occupy excessive space: see documents 29, 42, 43, 48, 57, and 59 in the primary source section of the bibliography. Document 59 (the Brown Memorandum) stands out as the culmination of ROK efforts and will thus be cited in full. Office of the Historian, 59. *Memorandum From the Assistant Director of the United States Operations Mission to Korea (Brown) to the Director of the United States Operations Mission to Korea of the Agency for International Development (Bernstein)*, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 59, Seoul, September 23, 1965, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d59>.

27 Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 67, 155.

28 Kwon, “Defender of the Nation,” 63.

corporated, phasing out its US-funded precursor and answering directly to Park without parliamentary oversight.²⁹ By reverse engineering borrowed or stolen foreign equipment, the ADD successfully developed modern arms without access to US technology transfers.³⁰ The mass production of these weapons would, of course, be the eagerly accepted responsibility of the *chaebol*. The symbiotic relationship between Park and these firms therefore extended to his illegal R&D activities, with, in one example, Kia’s CEO personally smuggling equipment from Fiat’s armored vehicle factory back to South Korea in 1976.³¹ Park had thus formed an elite *personal* network of trusted officials and private actors that orchestrated South Korea’s strategic catch-up outside of the legal boundaries of the state and, therefore, on an entirely endogenous basis. Because Park’s strategy was both informal and personal, it was also separate from foreign actors exercising influence over the South Korean military and government.

Park’s personal involvement was clearly significant in employing his “rich nation, strong army” formula. Conditioned by his military education, Park used his popularity to expand his control over both labor and enterprise. Exercising these new powers, he privatized and militarized the national economy, empowering key firms to dominate it and enlisting them as allies not only of Seoul but also of himself. The goal of “self-reliant national defence,” which took priority over the law, was simultaneously pursued through institutional, state-to-state, and covert means. In collaboration with the *chaebol*, South Korea’s MIC, and strategic capabilities developed under Park Chung-hee’s personal authority and ideology, this evidence strongly supports

29 Kwon, “Defender of the Nation,” 63-66, 68.

30 Kwon, “Defender of the Nation,” 69, 73; Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 76-77, 80. Ultimately, following the ADD’s impressive showing, some US technology transfers were lifted. This was, therefore, due to the ROK’s self-earned credibility as a reliable defense and R&D partner rather than a US charity.

31 Kwon, *Cornerstone of the Nation*, 155.

the argument that South Korea’s strategic catch-up should be chiefly credited to Park himself.

From Seoul or Saigon? The Exogenous Argument for ROK Strategic Catch-up

A strong counterargument for the ROK’s strategic catch-up centers on Washington’s increased support for Seoul during the Vietnam War.³² In exchange for sending 300,000 troops over the course of the war, South Korea received financial, technological, and strategic compensation that was not granted to non-combatant US allies like Japan and the Philippines.³³ During the war, over five billion dollars flowed from the United States and South Vietnam to South Korea in the form of preferential procurement contracts granted to *chaebol*, remittances from US-salaried ROK servicemen, US-funded military modernization projects, and both civilian and military development aid.³⁴ For all of Park’s qualitative orchestration of South Korea’s strategic catch-up, the quantitative impact of US aid is undeniable. At the end of the 1960s, for example, approximately half of all new fixed capital in the South Korean economy came directly from US military programs.³⁵

Further evidence, however, suggests that this aid was less important to ROK strategic catch-up than endogenous factors under the Park regime. While US aid to South Korea was significant, so too was Soviet and Chinese aid to North

32 Arguments surrounding Washington’s key role in ROK development are present across the literature, for example in Glassman and Choi, “Chaebol and the US,” 1176; Glenn Baek, “A Perspective on Korea’s Participation in the Vietnam War,” *Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, Issue Brief no. 53 (2013): 2-5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08116>; Doner, *Politics of Uneven Development*, 272.

33 Snyder, *Korea at the Crossroads*, 21; Glassman and Choi, “Chaebol and the US,” 1166-1168, 1176.

34 1973 US dollars, in cash and kind. Baek, “Korea’s Participation in Vietnam,” 2, 4; Jun-Kyung Kim and K.S. Kim, 2011 *Modularization of Korea’s Development Experience: Impact of Foreign Aid on Korea’s Development*, Seoul: Ministry of Strategy and Finance, Republic of Korea, 2011, 38, PDF, link omitted due to length (see bibliography); Doner, *Politics of Uneven Development*, 272; Office of the Historian, 76. *Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea*, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 76, Washington, January 27, 1966, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d76>; Office of the Historian, 48. *Memorandum of Conversation*, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 48, Washington, May 17, 1965, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d48>.

35 Glassman and Choi, “Chaebol and the US,” 1175.

Korea. From the end of the Second World War until 1970, both Korean states received an approximately equal level of foreign aid.³⁶ Moreover, the US *did not* increase its total aid to South Korea during the Vietnam War, though the proportion of this aid earmarked for military purposes increased.³⁷ By definition, strategic catch-up must occur in relative terms. Because the above evidence suggests that US aid to South Korea cannot be conclusively regarded as quantitatively superior to the foreign aid contemporaneously received by North Korea, it represents an absolute, not a relative gain for Seoul. Just as Kim Il-sung gained an edge over Syngman Rhee by effectively employing similar quantities of aid, it appears that Park Chung-hee bested Kim with an endogenous strategy more than external support.

In parallel normalization negotiations with Tokyo, however, Park's domestic political strength played a key role in allaying domestic opposition.³⁸ It is also important to note Park's highly positive view of Japan, which is not a prevailing characteristic in South Korean politics; having even adopted a Japanese name in his youth, Park was certainly a unique actor in normalization discussions.³⁹ On all accounts, therefore, Park's personal agency on this occasion is credibly discernible from that of South Korea's national impetus. Signed in June 1966, Japan and South Korea's normalization treaty secured approximately ten billion dollars in reparations for Seoul.⁴⁰ Amortized over a decade, the annual revenues this treaty provided to Seoul

36 Kim, "The Great Divergence," 329.

37 Kim and Kim, *Korea's Development Experience*, 38.

38 US officials, for example, noted serious domestic opposition in the ROK to the normalization agreement as well as Park's personal role in allaying public and parliamentary unrest. This may be considered flattery, but considering Park's extensive political control, the nature of his previous suppression of popular labour movements, and the ultimate achievement of the normalization treaty, indicates the fairness and honesty of this assessment. See primary source documents 43, 48, 53, and 57, which are not cited here for brevity.

39 Eckert, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea*, 91.

40 "Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation between Japan and the Republic of Korea," signed June 22, 1965, *United Nations Treaty Series* 583, no. 8473 (1966): 218-300, article 1 section 1, article 1 section 2, accessible at: <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=080000028012a2bc&clang=en>; Kazuhiko Togo, *Japan's Foreign Policy, 1945-2009*, (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010), 163, <https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1163/ej.9789004185012.i-484>.

were approximately equal to those gained through US civilian aid.⁴¹ Therefore, at the same time that ROK benefits from US aid can be better understood as rewards from a sternly negotiated trade, Park’s negotiations with Japan are representative of both his personal agency and the non-exclusivity of the US-ROK aid relationship. For these reasons, as well as the fact that the impact of US aid on ROK strategic catch-up was primarily driven by Park’s use of it, the role of US aid to South Korea during the Vietnam War does not refute the endogenous roots of ROK strategic catch-up.

Conclusion

During Park Chung-hee’s presidency, South Korea’s strategic position vis-à-vis the North improved significantly. From 1962 onwards, South Korea’s relative strategic gains against North Korea were principally the result of President Park’s personal agency rather than external factors. Defining strategic catch-up provides a clear analytical framework to compare endogenous and exogenous contributors to Seoul’s strategic growth relative to Pyongyang. The realist and circumstantial assumptions underpinning this framework are representative of Korea’s strategic environment and thus do not oversimplify empirical reality. Park Chung-hee’s extensive personal role in translating South Korea’s growing economic strength into military might demonstrates the endogenous roots of the ROK’s strategic catch-up. Instrumentalizing economic actors and operating outside of the law where he saw fit, Park successfully enacted a total mobilization of the South Korean economy in pursuit of “self-reliant national defense” and, ultimately, relative strategic gains. Finally, while exogenous factors are highly relevant, they

41 US military aid was significant, but the comparability of US and Japanese civilian aid to the ROK is demonstrative of the non-exclusivity of the US-ROK aid relationship. Kim and Kim, *Korea’s Development Experience*, 38; “Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation between Japan and the Republic of Korea,” article 1 section 1, article 1 section 2; Togo, *Japan’s Foreign Policy*, 163.

do not supersede the importance of endogenous factors in South Korea and the Park regime. Whereas the *relative* gains derived from the quantity of US aid (much of which was hard-earned by Seoul) are ambiguous, Park's personal role in effectively employing these funds and securing additional revenues from Japan is clearer.

Overall, this paper reveals the internal agency that South Korea retains despite its persistently challenging geopolitical environment. Nonetheless, almost half a century onwards from Park's 1979 assassination, questions of "self-reliant national defense" have not been put to rest, not least of all due to the issue of nuclear weapons, underscoring a key limitation of this paper. At the same time, President Yoon Suk-yeol's 2024 coup attempt indicates that democracy, too, is yet to fully settle in South Korea. In 2025, then, Seoul's now-democratic policymakers must confront an uncomfortable reality: beyond lingering insecurity, what do they share with Park Chung-hee? Faced with existential military threats, uncertain allies, and a stubbornly deteriorating demographic situation, it is yet to be seen how far the Republic of Korea is willing to go in the name of national defense.

Bibliography

- “Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation between Japan and the Republic of Korea.” Signed June 22, 1965. *United Nations Treaty Series* 583, no. 8473 (1966): 218-300. Accessible at: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=080000028012a2bc&clang=_en.
- Baek, Glenn. “A Perspective on Korea’s Participation in the Vietnam War.” *Asan Institute for Policy Studies*. Issue Brief no. 53 (2013): 1-10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08116>.
- Cha, Myung-soo, Nak-nyeon Kim, Ki-Joo Park, and Yitaek Park. *Historical Statistics of Korea*. Singapore: Springer, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3874-2>.
- Doner, Richard F. *The Politics of Uneven Development: Thailand’s Economic Growth in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106288156406196.
- Eckert, Carter J. *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism 1866-1945*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016. https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991105918195606196.
- Glassman, Jim, and Young-Jin Choi. “The Chaebol and the US Military-Industrial Complex: Cold War Geopolitical Economy and South Korean Industrialization.” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 46,

- no. 5 (May 1, 2014): 1160–1180. doi:10.1068/a130025p.
- Hong, Yong-Pyo. “North Korea in the 1950s: The Post Korean War Policies and Their Implications.” *The Korean Journal of International Relations* 44, no. 5 (2004): 215-234. PDF. https://www.kjis.org/journal/download_pdf.php?spage=215&volume=2&number=1.
- Hwang, Eui-gak. *The Korean economies: A Comparison of North and South*. Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Im, Hyug Baeg. “The Origins of the Yushin Regime: Machiavelli Unveiled” In *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*. Edited by Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, 233-262. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013. <https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.4159/harvard.9780674061064.c8>.
- Kim, Byung-Yeon, Suk Jin Kim and Keun Lee. “Assessing the economic performance of North Korea, 1954-1989: estimates and growth accounting analysis.” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 35, no. 3 (2007): 564–582.
- Kim, Duol. “The Great Divergence on the Korean Peninsula (1910–2020).” *Australian Economic History Review* 61, no. 3 (September 28, 2021): 318–341. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aehr.12225>.
- Kim, Jun-Kyung and K.S. Kim. *2011 Modularization of Korea’s Development Experience: Impact of Foreign Aid on Korea’s Development*. Seoul: Ministry of Strategy and Finance, Republic of Korea, 2011. PDF. https://archives.kdischool.ac.kr/bitstream/11125/41935/1/%282011%29%20Modularization%20of%20Korea%27s%20development%20experience_impact%20of%20foreign%20aid%20on%20Korea%27s%20

development.PDF.

Kwon, Peter Banseok. *Cornerstone of the Nation: the Defense Industry and the Building of Modern Korea Under Park Chung Hee*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2024.

Kwon, Peter Banseok. “Defender of the Nation, Champion of Science: The Agency for Defense Development as a Nexus for the Technological Transformation of South Korea.” *Journal of Korean Studies* 28, no. 1 (2023): 59–90. <https://doi.org/10.1215/07311613-10213182>.

Martel, William C. *Victory in War: Foundations of Modern Strategy*. Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991106886834506196.

Mearsheimer, John J. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.scpo.idm.oclc.org/lib/sciences-po/reader.action?docID=5508355&ppg=149>.

Nam, Hwasook. *Building Ships, Building a Nation: Korea’s Democratic Unionism Under Park Chung Hee*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009. https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/alma991107433301806196.

Nam, Joo-Hong. *America’s Commitment to South Korea: The First Decade of the Nixon Doctrine*. *LSE Monographs in International Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. https://librarysearch.library.utoronto.ca/permalink/01UTORONTO_INST/14bjeso/

alma991106632992606196.

Office of the Historian. 29. *Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State*. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 29. Seoul, December 21, 1964. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d29>.

Office of the Historian. 42. *Memorandum of Conversation*. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 42. Seoul, May 6, 1965. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d42>.

Office of the Historian. 43. *Memorandum of Conversation*. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 43. Seoul, May 12, 1965. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d43>.

Office of the Historian. 48. *Memorandum of Conversation*. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 48. Washington, May 17, 1965. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d48>.

Office of the Historian. 57. *Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State*. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 57. Seoul, July 10, 1965. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d57>.

Office of the Historian. 59. *Memorandum From the Assistant Director of the United States Operations Mission to Korea (Brown) to the Director of the United States Operations Mission to Korea of the Agency for International*

Development (Bernstein). Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 59. Seoul, September 23, 1965. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d59>.

Office of the Historian. 73. *Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State*. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 73. Seoul, January 21, 1966. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d73>.

Office of the Historian. 76. *Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea*. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXIX, Part 1, Korea: Document 76. Washington, January 27, 1966. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v29p1/d76>.

Snyder, Scott A. *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*. Columbia University Press, 2018. <https://books-scholarsportal-info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/uri/ebooks/ebooks6/degruyter6/2021-09-08/5/9780231546188>.

Togo, Kazuhiko. *Japan’s Foreign Policy, 1945-2009*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010. <https://doi-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/10.1163/ej.9789004185012.i-484>.