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Duality and Dominance: An Overview of Korean-American Relations, 1866–1997

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In 1866 when the United States first came into contact with Korea—a diminutive country located in a peninsula thousands of miles away across the Pacific Ocean—it is probable that few American political leaders, missionaries, businessmen, scholars, and naval and military officers were likely to have known the geographical whereabouts of the "Hermit Kingdom" and that none of them ever thought this kingdom would later constitute a vital security interest to American military and economic strategy. By 1997, South Korea by itself—about half of the peninsula and smaller than the state of Pennsylvania—has become the seventh largest trading partner to America while the other half, North Korea, with the fifth largest standing army in the world, has presented a troubling nuclear proliferation problem to the United States and its allies in East Asia and the Pacific region. What happened between these two peoples and their governments between 1866 and 1997 is the subject of this book.

The Korean people, the South Koreans in particular, have every right to be proud of their accomplishments in industrial-technological, educational, cultural, and even political arenas. Correspondingly, Americans have every right to be proud of their having been the first Western country to "open up" Korea to the new world, having given hope and aspirations to some leaders of the late Yi (Chosŏn) dynasty and during the period of Japanese colonization of the peninsula, having played the most important role during the Korean War, and having made indispensable contributions to the modernization and the industrialization of South Korea since 1945.

As some scholars of this book show, however, American-Korean relations have not been always so sanguine; in fact, there were periods when Washington dealt with its counterpart in Seoul in a rather disreputable

manner. Furthermore, American-North Korean relations from the beginning have been extremely hostile, only to be made worse by American participation in the Korean War. Only very recently has there been a significant improvement in their relationship with the conclusion of the Geneva Accord of 1994, which reputedly checked the nuclear ambitions of North Korea. Moreover, it should be emphasized that from the start of American relations with Korea until 1945 and with the two Koreas since 1945, the United States has had a great deal of what the two Koreas wanted and hoped to gain in an economic, diplomatic, and technological context, whereas the two Koreas have had only limited enticements to offer to the United States until recent years.

As a result, American relations with Korea before 1945 and its relations with the two Koreas since 1945 have been one-sided or asymmetrical. It is no wonder that in each of the following essays the themes of duality and dominance appear either openly or as a subtext, as they constitute a unifying element in these complex dual and triangular relations. As historians dealing with the relationship between these countries, we are naturally skeptical of overly simplistic characterizations. Still, this duality and dominance, which began over a century ago, exists even today and bids fair to persist for the foreseeable future.

There is bound to be a certain amount of duality in any bilateral relationship where two nations represent two different sets of interests. This is only natural and is to be expected. Problems arise only when one of the parties fails to recognize the divergence of interests. Most nations had by the late nineteenth century become sophisticated enough to make this distinction, but Korea possessed the naiveté of an innocent in the sometimes nefarious international politics in the age of imperialism as illustrated in our own respective studies, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896–1910* and *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868–1910*. Yur-Bok Lee's essay, "A Korean View of Korean-American Relations, 1882–1910," goes to the heart of this problem by examining the failure of the Koreans to appreciate the fact that the 1882 treaty with the United States meant one thing to the Koreans and quite another to the Americans.

It was perhaps natural for Korea to rely too heavily on the letter of the treaty, which promised "good offices" and, along with that, the hope that American advisers and diplomatic protection would come to the aid of a modernizing Korea, threatened by aggressive larger neighbors. After all, Korea had depended upon the Chinese for centuries, and it can be argued that dependence upon an outside power was not an unnatural response in Korea's foreign policy repertoire. Dependence may even have served Korea well, as long as the Chinese were able to be

depended upon. When China was no longer "dependable," after its defeat at the hands of Japan in 1895, Russia, Japan, and the United States appeared to be likely replacements. To many Koreans, Japan and Russia could not be trusted because they threatened Korean independence. Only the Americans could be trusted not to colonize Korea.

Korea needed the United States to intervene, but not to dominate. When the United States did little during the Sino-Japanese War except to urge the end of hostilities, the Koreans should have taken a cue: the United States was not prepared to intervene in Korea. Ever since the United States had established formal diplomatic relations with Korea, America had been content to allow the dominant power in the region to take the lead. It had first been China, through whose offices American diplomats passed to open relations with Korea in 1882. When the Chinese were removed, the United States simply sat back and waited for the appearance of the next dominant power, Japan, and prepared to follow its lead as well. At an early stage, the Americans had concluded that their interests in Korea were minimal and that it would be better to allow others to take the lead. After all, the United States allowed England to do the same in China for sixty years after the Opium War, and the United States derived great benefits from that relationship.

Unfortunately, the Americans spoke with two voices, not one, which began the duality that characterizes the relationship. The early phase of this relationship is familiar territory for Yur-Bok Lee, Professor Emeritus at North Dakota State University. His *Diplomatic Relations between the United States and Korea, 1866–1887,* his *Establishment of a Korean Legation in the United States, 1887–1890,* and his *West Goes East: Paul Georg von Möllendorff and Great Power Imperialism in Late Yi Korea,* are three guideposts in the historiography of this period. Because of Korean inexperience, a pattern of dominance was begun in which Koreans reacted to American signals. That the Koreans tended to depend upon the wrong signals—in this case the written word of the treaty and the unofficial voices of American diplomats, to the detriment of official American policy—was tragic, for Korea believed the United States to be a friend, although official American policy was decidedly equivocal at best toward Korea's fate.

Why and how American policy, which had begun on a friendly and forward basis, became disinterested and uncaring is the theme of the late Fred Harvey Harrington's essay, "An American View of Korean-American Relations, 1866–1905," which forms chapter 3 of this volume. Harrington, the former president of the University of Wisconsin and the author of *God, Mammon and the Japanese: Horace N. Allen and Korean-American Relations, 1884–1905,* looks at the frustrations of American

diplomats stationed in Korea who lamented the lack of a more aggressive American policy and who came to champion the cause of Korea. Thus for Koreans, the direction of American policy may have been less noticeable because many American diplomats disagreed with official policy, giving Koreans false hope in the process. In the end, it helps explain why Koreans unrealistically continued to believe that the United States was prepared to take active measures to safeguard the independence of Korea.

It might well be argued that this aspect of duality in Korean-American relations is nothing more than a case of misunderstanding a whimsical American policy, a few overzealous diplomats, and a Korean foreign policy that was oriented toward dependence and naive trust. But at least one diplomat, Horace Allen, was willing to use that duality to put one over on the Koreans. Allen took advantage of the overreliance of the Koreans on the United States and worked it to his advantage. In one instance, he persuaded the Korean emperor to grant an emigration franchise to a friend to pay off a political debt by falsely stating that his friend was an official of the American government and that, by giving him the franchise, the emperor would strengthen ties between Korea and the U.S. government. And Allen did this knowing that neither the State Department nor the Korean emperor would be the wiser. So if Americans in official capacities were not above taking advantage of Korean ignorance and American power, we must conclude that this is a kind of domination that a friend would not expect of another friend, though it might not qualify as out-and-out imperialism.

When the Russo-Japanese War broke out, the Koreans hoped that the United States would intervene. Official policy suggested otherwise, and thus there was no American intervention. On the one hand, it may be argued that the United States should have intervened. From the Korean perspective, the result of the war would probably have been colonialism of one sort or another, no matter who won. When Japan moved toward making Korea a protectorate after the Russo-Japanese War, the Americans stood aside. President Roosevelt seemingly confirmed the leading role of Japan in Korea by approving the Taft-Katsura Agreement of 1905. Thus with the United States as well as the rest of the world turning a deaf ear, the way was clear for Japan to annex Korea in 1910.

The creation of the protectorate in 1905 and annexation in 1910 triggered the rise of Korean nationalism. Within Korea, a "righteous army" unsuccessfully fought the Japanese in the hills. Overseas, Koreans in Manchuria and the United States assassinated Itō Hirobumi and D. W. Stevens in expressions of outrage. This nationalist movement, which called for the liberation of Korea from Japanese rule, looked to-

ward the United States. One of the leading and controversial figures in this movement, Syngman Rhee, had become Woodrow Wilson's protégé at Princeton. Later, Wilson's Fourteen Points, which called for national self-determination, gave Korean nationalists hope. Unfortunately, the duality in the relationship interfered. Wilson meant self-determination for countries that had been colonized by the Germans, not for the colonies of allies like Japan. The Koreans discovered this to their dismay when they sent a delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 hoping for independence.

Within Korea, the nationalist movement exploded in the March First Movement in 1919. It is no secret that many American missionaries were advocates of Korean independence, but they did not speak with the force of the American government behind them. Most treatments of Korean-American relations tend to ignore the colonial period because there were no government-to-government relations. Yet the essay by Wi Jo Kang, professor of world religions at Wartburg Theological Seminary and the author of *Christ and Caesar in Modern Korea: A History of Christianity and Politics*, is important because relations between nations need not be solely diplomatic. Moreover, even though the nature of the relationship between Korea and the United States differed in the period between 1905 and 1945, the same themes of duality and dominance again surface in his treatment of the subject.

Constituting chapter 4 of this volume, "Relations between the Japanese Colonial Government and the American Missionary Community in Korea, 1905–1945," by Professor Kang demonstrates the contrast between the "realist" policy of President Theodore Roosevelt, which was content to allow Japan to seize Korea for balance-of-power reasons, and the "idealistic" community of American missionaries, which in general sided with the Koreans against the often harsh aspects of Japanese colonial rule.

Another example of the contrasting duality in the relationship can be noted in the private versus the public support for Korea during the colonial period. Although the U.S. government did not support Korean independence until World War II, an overwhelming majority of newspaper editorials in the United States tended to support Korea as a victim of Japanese imperialism. Thus Wilsonian idealism, missionary support, and American public opinion stood in sharp contrast to government policy, which did not "come around" until Pearl Harbor. The fact that it was not until World War II that the United States supported Korean independence lends credence to the theme of duality and dominance in that this support came only because it coincided with the interests of the United States. Still, in part because of the legacy of

missionaries, many Koreans emerged from the colonial period looking to the United States as Korea's best friend. In the "temporary" division of Korea at the 38th parallel, the United States occupied the portion of Korea south of that line.

While the United States had been a Johnny-come-lately to the cause of Korean nationalism, the Soviets and the Chinese had opposed the Japanese and supported the Koreans and Korean nationalists to a greater extent and for a longer time than the United States had. This led, at least in part, to divided loyalties among Koreans when liberation came after thirty-six years of colonial rule in 1945. It is hardly surprising, then, that many Koreans began to look to the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc for support after the war. It was the Soviet Union that occupied the northern half of the peninsula after the defeat of Japan.

For the United States, the Pacific War and the Cold War that followed gave Korea an importance that it had previously lacked. While there were voices that downplayed the importance of the security of Korea, others argued that Korea was vital to American interests. It is this latter theme that appears in chapter 5 by Robert T. Oliver in his essay, "Transition and Continuity in Korean-American Relations in the Postwar Period." Robert Oliver is professor emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and the author of *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea, 1942–1960: A Personal Memoir* and *Syngman Rhee: The Man behind the Myth.* Perhaps more importantly, however, Oliver served as a close adviser to the first president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee. Thus Professor Oliver was in a unique position to observe the events of this period as they unfolded, which makes his essay here more akin to an eyewitness primary source than a secondary account. Indeed, the reader of this volume should be aware that in the reference halfway through the chapter to Rhee's "American Spokesman" in a *New York Times* article of November 10, 1946, Oliver is, in fact, referring to himself.

Oliver asserts that the United States in the early postwar years did not recognize the communist threat to Korea and, because of that, our policy was one of bungling. Rhee, on the other hand, was cognizant of the threat from communism, according to Oliver, and this divergence of views was part of an overall lack of understanding of things Korean on the part of the United States. Oliver thus provides a conservative critique of the duality and dominance theme of American policy toward Korea.

The occupation period from 1945 to 1950 is crucial to understanding the origins of the Korean War (1950–53). And Professor Oliver's slant on that period represents what was perhaps the dominant view of "what went wrong" with American policy. In recent years, however, a "revisionist" school of thought has emerged based upon the availability of new source material and new research, primarily by Bruce Cumings,

which challenges the views of Oliver and others. This school suggests that the United States did, in fact, perceive the threat of communism in Korea and, in response, imposed a postwar Korean society of our liking in the South. Because this interpretation has become the dominant paradigm in interpreting the origins of the Korean War and because it is in such sharp contrast to the view held by Professor Oliver, it is appropriate to summarize here its main points.

According to this view, President Roosevelt was not naive about the Soviet Union and communism, but rather wanted to encompass the Soviets in a joint trusteeship policy that would effectively neutralize any attempts to communize the peninsula. This "internationalist" policy of Roosevelt's, which was based upon the assumption of continued Soviet-American cooperation, however, lost considerable force after his death and the onset of the Cold War.

When Harry Truman succeeded to the presidency, voices counseling distrust of the Soviet Union and the containment of communism came to dominate the thinking of the new president. And in Korea, when the Koreans themselves organized a People's Republic and called for land reform and the punishment of collaborators with the Japanese, the U.S. occupation forces equated it with communism, despite the fact that it enjoyed widespread support throughout the peninsula. If Korea were to be united under this government, then the entire peninsula would be lost to communism because, it was feared, it was controlled by agents of the Soviet Union. Among Koreans, only the extreme right opposed the People's Republic because many of them had been collaborators or were large landholders. In this way, the interests of the right in Korea coincided with the American fear of a unified communist state on the Korean peninsula.

To prevent such a development, the emerging logic of containment called for not cooperating with the Soviet Union, the disbanding of the "leftist" People's Republic, the containment of communism north of the 38th parallel, and the erection of a separate noncommunist state in the South. In cooperation with the Korean right, whose key organizational element was the police, the military government ordered the disbanding of the People's Republic and arrested those who resisted. Talks with the Soviet Union went nowhere. And Syngman Rhee, who was both anticommunist and a nationalist, came to dominate a Korean political landscape that had moved to the right.

By 1948, liberals in the State Department who advocated cooperation with the Soviet Union had been silenced. In Korea, those who had supported the People's Republic and opposed the division of their country had also been silenced. The way was now clear for the final step in the transformation of U.S. policy into a unilateral "nationalist" one

that sought a separate anticommunist state in South Korea. The election of Syngman Rhee as the first president of the newly created Republic of Korea (ROK) made permanent what had originally been intended as a temporary division.

In sum, this view stands in sharp relief to that of Robert Oliver's, while still echoing the theme of duality and dominance. That is, American policy was not a policy of ignorance or mistakes. Rather, it was a conscious policy whose logical end was the creation of a separate state in the south. Either way, Korea played the role of victim. When North Korea attempted to eliminate the division in the attack in June of 1950, it was the United States that fought to maintain the continued existence of South Korea. This helps explain not only why the North Koreans see the United States as their enemy but also why students in South Korea see the United States as the primary villain in the division of their country.

One point on which all can agree is that the Korean War increased American involvement in Korea to an unprecedented level. While North Korea tended to depend on the Soviet Union and China militarily, politically, and economically, South Korea depended on the United States and Japan in a similar fashion. After the Korean War ended in 1953, the United States supported the regime of Syngman Rhee by signing a security treaty, stationing troops, and sending massive amounts of economic aid.

The relationship between South Korea and the United States, however, was a troubled one. As the Rhee regime became increasingly corrupt and authoritarian, the United States faced a dilemma. When demonstrations broke out in the spring of 1960, the American refusal to back Rhee allowed his government to fall and be replaced by the Chang Myŏn regime, which lasted only one year. It was apparent that the United States in this instance was a catalyst for a more democratic political order. But it also led many Koreans again to rely on the United States in subsequent years, hoping the United States would (and could) stand up as the spokesperson for democracy. When General Park Chung-hee overthrew the Chang Myŏn government in 1961, the United States officially deplored the coup, which ended Korea's brief experiment with democracy, but was unable to prevent it. The most the United States could do was force elections in 1963, which transformed the military government into a civilian one. While the United States was clearly concerned about the future of democracy in Korea, it was more concerned with the issue of security.

It is in this context that chapter 6, "The Security Relationship between Korea and the United States, 1960–1982," looks at the relationship between the two countries largely during Park's presidency, which

lasted from 1961 until his assassination in 1979. It is coauthored by Tae-Hwan Kwak of Eastern Kentucky University, who is a specialist on contemporary Korean politics and unification strategies and the editor, among other works, of *The Two Koreas in World Politics*. This chapter argues that security interests became paramount in the bilateral relationship as part of a basic American policy in Northeast Asia that sought stability. Just as considerations of a regional balance in East Asia motivated Theodore Roosevelt's actions at the turn of the century, a similar policy of maintaining a balance in East Asia has led successive American governments to support South Korea against North Korea in the name of stability.

Stability on the Korean peninsula had been threatened by the actions of North Korea. When North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, the United States was placed in an adversarial position against this nation whose policy appeared to be that of overrunning the South and causing instability in East Asia. Because the security interests of the United States toward South Korea were so heavily predicated upon the actions and intentions of North Korea, any consideration of postwar American policy toward Korea cannot ignore the relationship between the United States and North Korea.

The late Andrew Nahm, for many years a member of the history faculty of Western Michigan University and the author of a popular textbook, *Korea: Tradition and Transformation*, in his final scholarly contribution to Korean studies, contributes the essay that constitutes chapter 7 of this volume. Arguing that North Korea has sought American recognition and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, Nahm analyzes North Korea's seemingly contradictory policy of mixing provocations with the occasional olive branch. Throughout most of the nearly half-century following the Korean War, North Korea had been singularly unsuccessful in achieving its policy goals because of the asymmetrical duality and dominance in the relationship: the United States' preponderance of power combined with its continued hostility toward the North. The North attempted to reduce this asymmetry by introducing the specter of nuclear weaponry. To some extent, as Professor Nahm demonstrates, North Korea was at least partially successful in its policy goals in that it forced the United States to negotiate with it and, as such, gained at least *de facto* recognition as a result.

Even as North Korea attempted to reduce the asymmetry with the United States by nuclear blackmail, South Korea's growing economic (and consequently, political) power was reducing the asymmetry in a peaceful and evolutionary manner befitting the relationship between two allies. In the eighth and final chapter of this volume, University of

Cincinnati professor emeritus Han-Kyo Kim, whose books *Studies on Korea: A Scholar's Guide* and *Korea and The Politics of Imperialism, 1876–1910,* are well known, surveys the 1980s and 1990s. Dealing with issues of trade, anti-Americanism, growing independence, and social and cultural convergence, Professor Kim concludes that, while the two nations are not yet equal partners, they have put the patron-client relationship of the past behind them. Thus the duality continues, but in a more modified form.

It is always hazardous to predict the future, but if Korean-American relations continue on the same trajectory in the twenty first century, one can predict that the asymmetric duality and dominance of the relationship will continue to diminish. The history of that century will of course be written by historians of the future. We will be satisfied if the essays in this volume illuminate some of the major themes in the history of Korean-American relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We begin with Yur-Bok Lee's essay on Korean views of Korean-American relations at the end of the nineteenth century.