

## **SOUTH KOREAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER SYNGMAN RHEE AND PARK CHUNG HEE: CONTRASTING STRATEGIES UNDER SIMILAR STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS**

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### **Abstract**

International relations theory tends to be characterized by a dichotomy between those who emphasize international constraints with regards to grand strategy and foreign policy decisions, most often associated with realist theories of international relations, and those who emphasize domestic factors, most notably liberal theories. These two approaches are often framed as if they were incompatible. This article attempts to contribute to bridging the gap by examining the presidencies of Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee of the Republic of Korea. A comparison between the two presidencies reveals very different political visions for the Republic of Korea. However, it also shows very contrasting grand strategy and foreign policy options under similar international constraints. This is consistent with neoclassical realist theory and the idea that grand strategy and foreign policy are fundamentally determined by international pressures but nevertheless are also influenced by domestic-level factors.

### **Keywords**

Syngman Rhee; Park Chung Hee; Republic of Korea; United States of America; Neoclassical Realist Theory.

### **Resumo**

A teoria das relações internacionais tende a caracterizar-se por uma dicotomia entre aqueles que enfatizam as condicionantes internacionais no que concerne a grande estratégia e as decisões de política externa, que estão geralmente associadas às teorias realistas das relações internacionais, e aqueles que enfatizam os fatores domésticos, mais particularmente, as teorias liberais. As duas perspetivas são frequentemente consideradas como se fossem incompatíveis. O presente artigo procura contribuir para se estabelecer uma ponte entre as duas perspetivas através da análise das presidências de Syngman Rhee e de Park Chung Hee da República da Coreia. A comparação entre ambas as presidências revela duas visões políticas muito diferentes para a República da Coreia. No entanto, também revela que foram adotadas duas estratégias bastante diferentes por parte dos dois presidentes apesar de condicionantes estruturais semelhantes. Este resultado é coerente com a teoria realista neoclássica e a noção de que a grande estratégia e a política externa são fundamentalmente determinadas em função das pressões internacionais existentes, mas também são influenciadas por fatores a nível doméstico

### **Palavras-chave**

Syngman Rhee; Park Chung Hee; República da Coreia; Estados Unidos da América; Teoria Realista Neoclássica



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## **SOUTH KOREAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER SYNGMAN RHEE AND PARK CHUNG HEE: CONTRASTING STRATEGIES UNDER SIMILAR STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS**

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### **Introduction**

International relations theory tends to be characterized by a dichotomy between those who emphasize international constraints, most often associated with realist theories of international relations, and those who emphasize domestic factors, notably liberal theories. These two approaches are often framed as if they were incompatible. This article attempts to somewhat bridge the gap by examining the presidencies of Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee. Syngman Rhee was the first president of the Republic of Korea<sup>2</sup>, between 1948 and 1960, after the division of the Korean Peninsula into two states, South Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea<sup>3</sup>, while Park Chung Hee was the third president of South Korea, from 1961 to 1979.

A comparison between the two presidencies reveals very different political visions for South Korea. Nevertheless, and most interestingly, it also shows contrasting foreign policy options in spite of similar international constraints. This provides support to the idea that grand strategy and foreign policy are fundamentally determined by structural factors and international pressures but are also influenced by domestic agenda setting. This is consistent with the neoclassical realist approach to international politics that argues that grand strategy and foreign policy decisions are fundamentally determined by changes in the structure of the international system but are also dependent on domestic factors and allow states to pursue different policy options (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016; Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro, 2009).

The article proceeds as follows: After a brief introduction, I present the context of the first years of South Korea after the division of the Korean Peninsula, underlying the regional setting and the main international pressures. Following that, I examine the presidency of Syngman Rhee in terms of his policy options. After that, I lay out the circumstances that allowed Park Chung Hee to gain power in South Korea, as well as his political vision and strategy for South Korea. Next, I detail Park Chung Hee's foreign policy decisions relative to South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War. This is

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank two anonymous referees for helpful written comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, South Korea.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, North Korea.



followed by an analysis of the consequences of South Korea re-establishing relations with Japan. The last section examines the motivations and the consequences of Park Chung Hee's implementation of the Yushin Constitution. The article concludes with a presentation of the main conclusions.

### **The neoclassical realist framework**

The main idea behind neoclassical realist theory is that in addition to structural effects there are domestic-level factors that intervene in foreign policy decisions. It is a realist theory of foreign policy that describes the structural effects of power in international relations. Those structural effects act as a major constraint in the states' foreign policy decision-making process. Nevertheless, neoclassical realist theory also considers that domestic-level factors intervene between the external drivers and the strategic response by states.

According to structural realism, given the characteristics of the international system and under the conditions of anarchy and self-help "the pressures of competition weight more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures." (Waltz, 1986: 329). What that means is that states cannot ignore the conditions of the international system and the requirements of international competition because that may put their security at risk. The structural elements are considered determinant in the sense that states that choose to ignore them risk facing negative consequences within the international system.

However, structural realism does not tell us anything about the state's domestic political process of decision-making concerning foreign policy decisions as strategic responses. Ignoring those domestic factors would mean that foreign policy decisions are only determined by structural external constraints. As a theory of foreign policy, neoclassical realism considers that the international structural constraints dominate but that there are also intervening domestic factors between the international system and the strategic response in terms of foreign policy decisions (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016). As such, the structure is not considered to be the sole determinant of strategic outcomes because states do not only respond to external conditions. In a certain sense, it is also about understanding that "what is needed is an ideational component to realist theory that explains why some states take advantage of systemic opportunities, while others do not" (Schweller, 2009: 230). What that means is that under similar structural constraints there is room for states to act differently up to a certain extent.

Neoclassical realist theory analyses how and why states respond to certain pressures in particular ways, paying attention to the importance of the permissiveness of the external environment in determining the impact of domestic level intervening variables on foreign policy outcomes (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016: 52-56). The external environment provides the starting point, but domestic variables play a significant role in determining foreign policy outcomes. In order to try to refine the framework Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell (2016: 58-79) identify four categories that affect foreign policy decisions to systemic stimuli given the external environment: leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions. These categories will not always influence foreign policy decisions nor to the same degree. Understanding how



they intervene in the state's foreign policy decision-making process will also depend on the nature of the countries' political system, leadership, political institutions, and culture.

Concerning the foreign policy executive in the specific case of South Korean foreign policy decision-making, the key domestic actors were both Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee at the time of each presidency given the non-democratic nature of the political system in each case. Therefore, although there may have been other actors who were involved in the foreign policy executive their influence would have been negligible. These other actors did not have a significant role in the decision-making process and as a result the foreign policy executive is considered to have been limited to each president. Having said that, even in democratic systems there may be members of the government that may be interested in foreign policy affairs but their role and relevance in the state's foreign policy is not meaningful.

Noteworthy, neoclassical realist theory is not a very homogeneous theory. Back in 2009, Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman (2009: 10) stated that there was not just one version of neoclassical theory of foreign policy. And more recently, Onea (2012: 4) has argued in his study—which tests the explanatory power of the main strands of neoclassical realism in accounting for U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War—that there are three schools that coexist and compete within neoclassical realism. One of them is considered the closest to traditional neorealism while a second one tends towards classical realism, which is not a structural theory. In addition, there is a third school that sits in between the former two. These schools reflect different views concerning “how they weigh the contribution of structural and non-structural variables in foreign policymaking, and according to their emphasis on factors belonging to either domestic or international sphere”.

There have also been significant developments over time. Initially, neoclassical realism attempted to explain why states did not behave as expected by neorealism. In these circumstances, states were seen as responding to systemic forces but in inconsistent ways, most notably in a way that has been named as “underbalancing” (Schweller, 2004; 2006). This has been named Type I Neoclassical Realism, which was followed by Type II that attempts to develop a theoretical approach to explain foreign policy (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016: 26-29). However, more recently the focus has been on formulating a theory of international politics — Type III Neoclassical Realism (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016: 82-83). Beyond addressing states foreign policy, it attempts to explain how those choices, particularly by great powers, can affect and change the nature of the international system.

### **The first years following the division of the Korean Peninsula**

Over the course of its long and fascinating history the Korean Peninsula has been the stage for conflicts and wars, some of them internal and others due to invasions and occupations by foreign countries, notably great powers. As noted by Oberdorfer and Carlin (2014: 3), “Geography dealt Korea a particular difficult role. Located in a strategic but dangerous neighborhood between the great powers of China, Japan, and Russia, Korea has suffered nine hundred invasions, great and small, in its two thousand years of recorded history”. More recently and following the end of the Second World War the Korean Peninsula was divided into two states along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel—South Korea and



North Korea. The former under the influence and protection of the United States of America<sup>4</sup> and the later under the influence of the Soviet Union. This decision was initially taken for an unlimited period of time and without even consulting Koreans. Moreover, it was taken before August 15, 1945, the date at which Hirohito, the 124<sup>th</sup> Emperor of Japan, announced Japan's surrender (Myers, 2010: 29).

The intentions of President Kim Il Sung of North Korea from the very beginning were to reunite the Korean Peninsula under his leadership and the communist ideology. With that objective, North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, which sparked the Korean War<sup>5</sup> that lasted until 1953 (Cumings, 2011; Haruki, 2017; Hastings, 2020; Sandler, 1999). The war transformed both Koreas into enemies with the war ending with an armistice rather than a peace agreement. This is significant because it signals that the war had not ended at the time. The situation remained as such for many years<sup>6</sup>.

The Korean War needs to be considered within the broader conflict between the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—that is, the Cold War. This also displays the security fragility of the region. Although from a geostrategic point of view the division of the Korean Peninsula into two states was an acceptable solution for the two superpowers—with both Koreas gaining legitimacy relative to their existence—the actual situation never ceased to be a source of tensions and problems, both at the political, security, and the economic level (Buzo, 2007: 84-85). Significantly, both South Korea and North Korea became subject to the influence and support of the United States and the Soviet Union for several years, respectively. In the case of South Korea, that support is still significant today whereas in the case of North Korea the Soviet support was replaced mainly by China since the end of the Cold War. Over time, South Korea has become one of the most developed countries in the world whereas North Korea remains a close authoritarian regime.

The Korean War also had a significant impact with long-lasting effects in the United States, albeit not comparable to the Vietnam War (Cumings, 2011: 205-222). The most significant is, in all probability, the approval and implementation of NSC-68 with very important and lasting implications for the American military-industrial complex. The change from the previous containment strategy that had been developed by George Kennan to NSC-68 suggested that the military component should play an important role in the containment doctrine, even at times when the United States was not at war, in order to ensure the country's preparedness to intervene militarily when deemed necessary.

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, United States or U.S.

<sup>5</sup> During this conflict, South Korea was supported by the United States while North Korea was essentially supported by the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent by the Popular Republic of China, henceforth China.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that an attempt to sign a formal peace treaty only occurred during the inter-Korean summit on April 27, 2018, between Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae In, with the signing of the Panmunjom Declaration under the auspices of the United States and China. This declaration involved an agreement about mutual efforts and actions for transforming the 1953 armistice agreement into a formal peace treaty. Later, during the 2018 Trump-Kim Jong Un summit a Joint Statement was also signed reaffirming the Panmunjom Declaration.



## **Syngman Rhee, the recurrent idea of reunification, and the North American support**

In addition to Kim Il Sung, Syngman Rhee also displayed intentions of reunification. In fact, he pressured the U.S. authorities several times to prolong the war with that objective, inclusively delivering speeches to that avail (Seth, 2011: 331). This was largely due to fears of North Korea because he was aware of Kim Il Sung's intentions. Furthermore, since the end of the Korean War, and even after the signing of the ROK/U.S. Mutual Security Agreement in October of 1953<sup>7</sup>, he continued to struggle between the need for U.S. support in economic and security terms—which he never questioned—and the will to achieve reunification. In fact, the signing of the ROK/U.S. Mutual Security Agreement resulted largely from Syngman Rhee's pressuring President Eisenhower to have security guaranties from the United States against external enemies, in particular North Korea (Kim, 2012: 446). However, it often became a source of tension between himself and Eisenhower, with the former having tried to convince the latter to agree to an invasion of North Korea, albeit without success. Noteworthy, the sentiment towards reunification at the time was shared by the majority of the South Korean population (Seth, 2011: 480).

However, the United States did not share the same view and did not wish to get involved in another war. According to Cha (2016: 4), the reason for the ROK/U.S. Mutual Security Agreement at the time—as with the case of the similar agreement in 1954 with the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek—was not only to contain the spread of communism, but also to avoid these countries engaging war with North Korea and China, respectively. In the particular case of North and South Korea it was essentially to avoid any attempt of reunification by force. The alternative would probably involve the United States in a generalized war in the region, which was negatively viewed for several reasons, in particular because the major concern of the United States at the time was Western Europe.

At any event, the Korean War ended up strengthening Syngman Rhee with respect to his presidency due to his popularity and in spite of the existence of a strong political domestic opposition, particularly at the National Assembly. At the time, the South Korean population was also focused on family issues attempting to survive in the aftermath of the war and all of its impact in terms of the endured suffering (Buzo, 2007: 95). His popularity may be somewhat puzzling given that the regime was quite authoritarian and conservative. Nevertheless, Syngman Rhee was profoundly anti-communist and very weary of North Korea, which was valued by a large proportion of the South Korean population. This was because there were a number of occasions when North Korea considered the possibility of reverting the situation of the Korean War and reunite the whole Korean Peninsula under its communist regime (Buzo, 2007: 91). The domestic support provided by the general population to Syngman Rhee in terms of his stance

<sup>7</sup> The ROK/U.S. Mutual Security Agreement was established in October 1953, although many sources consider that it was only signed in the beginning of 1954.



towards North Korea can be considered as an example of domestic factors influencing foreign policy decisions.

Concerning foreign policy and economic development, Syngman Rhee was a very inward-looking leader. He was very nationalist and never really revealed any serious intention to internationalize South Korea. This is somewhat surprising given that he had been educated in the United States and lived there for several years (Seth, 2010: 96).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, because of his memories of the Japanese invasion, which occurred between 1910 and 1945, he always refused to re-establish diplomatic and commercial relations with Japan and never attempted to establish external relations with other countries—besides the United States—that could eventually lead to a stronger economic growth and development, as well as a greater autonomy of the country. The re-establishment of relations between South Korea and Japan would have strongly benefited South Korea in terms of its economic development as later occurred under Park Chung Hee (Kim, 2012: 447-448). Syngman Rhee's main concern was to maintain the United States' support to South Korea with respect to the economy and security.

Syngman Rhee's regime was also quite corrupt, which generated great dissatisfaction from a significant part of the South Korean population, particularly in light of the slow economic recovery after the Korean War. Overtime, Syngman Rhee's overall domestic support fell, particularly as the rural population, which tended to support him the most, started migrating to the cities. The urban population was significantly more critical of corruption and of the slow economic recovery, and that clearly weakened the regime over time (Seth, 2011: 374-375). As a result, South Koreans began to contest and challenge the regime and several public demonstrations, notably by students, took place at the time. Many were repressed but despite that they did not become less intense, quite the opposite. Ultimately, Syngman Rhee resigned in 1960 (Buzo, 2007: 98). After his demise, a parliamentary regime followed, the Second Republic under President Yun Posun—pro-western and democratic. Nevertheless, Posun's presidential term was a short one, from August 13, 1960, to March 24, 1962, as public demonstrations and instability continued.

Syngman Rhee's legacy is still very debated and disputed. To some, he was the founder of South Korea and the president who saved the country from communism. With his conservative stance, he was able to protect South Korea from negative foreign influence. But to others, he was just a dictator, clinging to power, someone who opted for a "divide and rule strategy" and who failed to develop the country (Kim, 2012: 428). Others consider him a patriotic leader, always searching for an opportunity to reunite the Korean Peninsula (Seth, 2011: 376).

### **The politics and strategy of Park Chung Hee**

Park Chung Hee rose to power on May 16, 1961, through a military coup and following the democratic attempt by President Yun Posun, and at a time when street demonstrations were increasingly violent (Seth, 2011: 339). He remains a controversial figure but one that played a very significant part in South Korea's history (Podoler, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Syngman Rhee held a BA degree from George Washington University, a master's degree from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. from Princeton University.



His background and education were very different from Syngman Rhee. He was born in 1917 to a poor rural family and he was the youngest of seven brothers. Early in his life he showed academic ability, particularly at the Taegu Normal School, where he was admitted in 1932 (Buzo, 2007: 106). Later, he gained access to the Manchukuo Military Academy and served as a military officer in the Japanese Imperial Army. He commissioned as a second lieutenant from 1944 until having been demobilised in 1946. Following that, he was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1948, reprieved and dismissed from the Army, after being implicated in the Yosu military rebellion. He was later rehired as a civilian, then reinstated after the outbreak of the Korean War, and finished the war as a Brigadier general. By May 1961, he had advanced to the rank of Major-general. From a political point of view, although Park Chung Hee considered himself a democrat, he was neither a liberal nor a democrat. In fact, he was favourable to an excessive concentration of power at the presidential level and considered that the liberal and democratic system led to social fragmentation (Moon and Jun, 2011: 125).

Park Chung Hee frequently compared the presidency of Syngman Rhee to a democratic and corrupt system, very incompetent and divisive, and one that had been incapable of addressing the external challenges facing South Korea, such as had occurred with the Joseon Dynasty, which had not been able to prevent the Japanese invasion in 1910 (Park, 1970: 121). He considered Syngman Rhee a dictator who had worn down South Korea during his twelve years of presidency (Hee, 1970b: 166). Differently, he aimed at constructing a self-sufficient South Korea, independent of other countries. In his view there was a need for South Korea to be more assertive in the international sphere and to be able to be more autonomous and self-reliable. In one of his works he states, in what seems to be a melancholic tone, that: "A deep regret is that despite all the accumulated sufferings, we have never once undertaken a foreign excursion by turning the tide" (Hee, 1970a: 166).

However, although Park Chung Hee would like to see South Korea as an autonomous country the reality was that the dependency relative to the United States was almost complete. As a result, any withdrawal of the United States from South Korea at the time would have led in all probability to an annexation by North Korea. During the 1950s, U.S. aid to South Korea amounted to more than fifty percent of the government national yearly budget and about seventy-two percent of the defence budget (Baek, 1982: 118). Support in terms of infrastructures included around five hundred economic consultants responsible for controlling financial support. Because of this dependency, the United States largely controlled the economic policy of the South Korean government (Kim and Baik, 2011: 58). Notwithstanding, the capacity of the United States to enforce certain policies and measures on the South Korean government in order to achieve certain specific goals was somewhat limited due to the existing international pressures that also gave the South Korean regime some leverage. In effect, the United States were constantly confronted with somewhat conflicting priorities. On the one hand, there was the need to defend South Korea against foreign threats as part of the strategy of containment during the Cold War. On the other hand, the existing will to foster democratic and liberal values that were associated with progress and development was also paramount in terms of legitimising domestically U.S. support to South Korea (Dueck, 2006: 84).



More importantly, there was always great difficulty in terms of accounting for, on the one hand, the security concerns and, on the other, the development and cultural choices. Much of that resulted from diverging views on each part concerning different priorities relative to reforms and economic policy measures. Often, South Korean leaders were primarily concerned with essentially obtaining as much support as possible from the United States for as long as possible, as was the case of Syngman Rhee. These situations tended to focus on security, and to somewhat neglect the creation of the necessary conditions for South Korea to be able to gain more autonomy. However, the country's economic conditions also constrained the U.S. authorities to accommodate certain positions on the part of those leaders because the costs of withdrawal for the United States were also high (Kim and Baik, 2011: 59). What this all meant was that, until and during the early 1960s, South Korea faced a complex dilemma given that the country needed to withstand U.S. influence in order to obtain its support but did not achieve the much-needed economic development. Nonetheless, the United States was also unable to reap the expected benefits from the development of South Korea, which raised the costs of a possible U.S. withdrawal given the fragility of South Korea relative to North Korea.

### **The South Korean support during the Vietnam War**

There is evidence that supports the idea that Park Chung Hee feared a U.S. withdrawal during the 1960s and 1970s. This is supported by the fact that there had been threats from North Korea caused by incursions along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, with an increase of around 200 incidents per year to 736 in 1961 alone (Lee, 2011b: 405). Moreover, when Park Chung Hee took power in South Korea the North Korean economy was stronger than South Korea due to strong existing alliances with the Soviet Union and China. This was also reinforced by the reductions in annual U.S. support to South Korea, from US\$230 million in the period between 1959 and 1963 to US\$110 million in the period from 1964 to 1968, which is less than half (Lee, 2011b: 407).

Also providing support to this idea was his decision to send South Korean troops to assist U.S. efforts in the Vietnam War in 1965, which was a controversial decision at the time (Brazinsky, 2007: 132-133). It can be considered as resulting from Park Chung Hee's willingness to ensure the continuing support of the U.S. but also due to significant U.S. pressures to see the adoption of a series of foreign policy initiatives by Park Chung Hee. This was in order to see economic reforms and political liberalization implemented, which were considered crucial. The decision to send combat troops to Vietnam was not without risks given the political opposition and the occurring social unrest in South Korea. Nevertheless, it proved to be a wise foreign policy decision given that South Korea was also able to guarantee additional U.S. financial support (Kim, 2011: 174). In the end, although the decision resulted largely from U.S. pressures it enabled Park Chung Hee to ensure economic assistance, to carry out reforms, and to secure continuing U.S. Military support. It seems clear that Park Chung Hee viewed South Korean assistance to the United States in the Vietnam War as critical, which is why he volunteered to send South Korean troops to Vietnam if deemed necessary during a meeting in Washington in 1961. That explains also why in August 1963 he reported that if the United States requested that South Korea send military troops to Vietnam, then South Korea would be "Obligated out of both economic and security considerations" (Lee, 2011b: 409). Therefore, when



the American request arrived, he did not hesitate to send non-combatant personnel, initially in May and December 1964, and later combat troops in July 1965 and June 1966. That said, the South Korean contribution to the Vietnam War was at a reduced cost because the annual cost of a South Korean soldier in Vietnam was about \$5,000 while that of an American soldier was approximately 13,000, that is, almost triple the amount, which translated into a very satisfactory solution for the United States (Lee, 2011b: 416).

From a security point of view, Park Chung Hee got the assurance of a continued U.S. presence in South Korea. But in addition, it facilitated the acquisition of some combat experience and a modernization of the South Korean armed forces. Further to that, it created opportunities for some South Korean companies to produce useful products to support the war effort, which strengthened the South Korean economy. However, some additional conditions were also agreed. For instance, when the first South Korean troops were sent to Vietnam the agreement was that there would be no reductions in U.S. military in South Korea without prior consultation with the South Korean government to ensure that U.S. support would be maintained up to a certain level. Moreover, the United States provided funding for the transport of South Korean troops to Vietnam (Lee, 2011b: 412-413). This is also how Park Chung Hee obtained assistance and support from the United States to modernize the South Korean military forces in terms of equipment and other defence capabilities. Furthermore, whenever possible, preference was also given to South Korean producers to supply equipment and services to the United States government. In return, the United States would provide technical support to South Korea to improve its export capabilities (Lee, 2011b: 419). Lastly, Park Chung Hee gained political support for his authoritarian way of governing.

### **The importance of restoring relations between South Korea and Japan**

Park Chung Hee's decision to send South Korean troops to Vietnam also had the effect of increasing the importance of South Korean and Japanese contributions to U.S. strategy in Asia, particularly during the Vietnam War as the war got worse. In terms of foreign policy orientation, although both Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee both adopted a similar attitude relative to alliances, the latter was much more outward oriented than the former (Snyder, 2018: 18). This is a relevant issue. Contrary to what had always been the position of his predecessor, Syngman Rhee—who for decades strongly opposed to the re-establishment of relations with Japan—Park Chung Hee decided to promote the restoration of these relations. Following much debate within South Korea relations between the two countries were re-established in 1965 (Kim, 2012: 448). According to Park Chung Hee, South Korea should view the military system as a reference in terms of an organization model and guide itself by Japan, particularly with its achievements in terms of development during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>9</sup> Inclusively, South Korea should copy and emulate the Japanese procedures that were responsible for its success (Moon and Jun, 2011: 120).

These ideas were the basis for the re-establishment of diplomatic and commercial relations between South Korea and Japan in 1964 and 1965 under the auspices of the

<sup>9</sup> Following the political, economic, and social developments during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) Japan became one of the great powers.



United States. In Park Chung Hee's view, the re-establishment of these relations would bring political and economic advantages to South Korea. In his own words: "Diplomatic rapprochement between Korea and Japan has remained an unfinished task for the past ten years" (Hee, 1970a: 156).

Some in Japan, notably its Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, but not necessarily most of the population, also saw interest in these relations (Lee, 2011a: 438). In his view, the fact that Park Chung Hee was an authoritarian leader also had the advantage of him being able to control South Korea's internal politics, and to prevent anti-Japanese and communist movements from developing, which would have had negative consequences for Japan. Notwithstanding, the restoration of these relations also caused a great stir and discontent in South Korea, particularly among students. This was fundamentally related to the need to establish whether the Japanese colonial past in Korea was to be considered legal or illegal. Following that, it was important to determine whether South Korea should abandon its right to compensation from Japan (Lee, 2011a: 451). Nonetheless, when the drafting of the treaty was completed in April 1965 the treaty was signed in late 1965.

Ultimately, the normalization of relations between South Korea and Japan favoured Park Chung Hee's political situation, in large measure due to his demonstration of being able to manage asymmetric relations between South Korea and the United States during the 1960s, with positive consequences for the South Korean economy (Lee, 2011a: 456). Instead of systematically seeking to increase South Korean autonomy relative to the United States and challenging some of the claims for stability and economic development in favour of the reunification of the Koreas—as had happened with Syngman Rhee—Park Chung Hee's strategy provided political and military support to the United States in its strategy for Asia. This was done in exchange for political, economic, and military assistance in the development of South Korea. The result of that strategy was that he was able to bring the United States closer to South Korea. With this strategy, he also managed to acquire a degree of autonomy that allowed him to govern without integrating some of the fundamental democratic and liberal values promoted by the United States, and to pursue a high degree of planning, directing and authoritarianism (Lee, 2011b: 428-9).

### **The Yushin Era: A turning point?**

The presidency of Park Chung Hee was also marked by the implementation of the Yushin Constitution<sup>10</sup> in 1971, following the electorate approval of a very substantial revision of the Constitution on November 21 of the same year, and that lasted until October 26, 1979—the date of his assassination. The basic idea was to strengthen executive powers in order to meet the demands and challenges posed by the economy and the possibility of reunification brought about by a military initiative carried out by North Korea. This granted almost absolute powers to Park Chung Hee on a wide range of subjects, including appointing a third of the National Assembly and a virtually life-long presidency, with the guarantee of six-year terms without any limit. This would occur through an indirect election by an electoral college of about 2,300 directly elected delegates supported by

<sup>10</sup> Frequently referred to as the Yushin System as well.



security institutions such as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency and the Presidential Security Service (Im, 2011: 234). The regime became even more totalitarian and repressive than during the previous period. According to Brazinsky (2007: 160), "In October 1972 Park suddenly ended what remained of South Korean democracy". Park Chung Hee declared a state of martial law, dismissed the National Assembly, and even shut down universities (Buzo, 2007: 122). The media also became under strict censorship. The enactment of the new constitution demonstrated a growing lack of tolerance on the part of Park Chung Hee for any demonstrations against the regime or its leadership.

From an economic point of view, Park Chung Hee adopted more expansionary fiscal and monetary policies from 1972 onwards, but also some totally contrary to the liberalization previously occurred in the 1960s (Solingen, 2007: 89). A system of price controls was implemented, including various subsidies and protection of national industries, namely heavy industry and electronics, with a view to increase national autonomy and independence. The well-known *Chaebols*<sup>11</sup> were great supporters of these policies, which were quite successful in terms of economic development, particularly those export-oriented, and generated results often significantly better than what had initially been anticipated (Kim, 2004: 117).

Noteworthy, the expression Yushin in Japanese is pronounced *Isshim*, in reference to the reforms conducted in Japan in the 19th century during the Meiji Era. Park Chung Hee's intention was greatly influenced by the Meiji Restoration in Japan and his vision of making South Korea go through a process similar to the one that had occurred in Japan. His intention was to transform South Korea from a political, economic, and security point of view to make the country richer and more powerful. Buzo (2007: 126) points out that, despite all the negatives, this change had its positives. It allowed Park Chung Hee to project the image and vision of a strong and rich South Korea, particularly from a militarily point of view, which was, in some way, a feeling shared by many South Koreans and much like what was happening in Japan at the time.

There is a debate as to whether these political changes should be considered as a continuation of the third Republic or its end. For instance, Buzo (2007: 123) considers that, after all, this period is part of a continuity of the third Republic while Seth (2011: 407) refers to the Yushin Era as the end of the third Republic. Im (2011) also raises this issue. In effect, Park Chung Hee's political regime had shown, since its inception, a centralising and totalitarian tendency. Thus, in this sense the Yushin Era was related to promoting and ensuring Park Chung Hee's way of governing (Im, 2011: 236-7). However, the Yushin Era was, to a great extent, most likely caused by pressures stemming from outside South Korea, particularly the changes that occurred in the international environment and a response to structural constraints, albeit consistent with Park Chung Hee's wish to reinforce his power (Seth, 2011: 408-9). That is, the structural constraint due to the international setting should probably be considered as the major policy constraint, in addition to the factors related to the political domestic agenda associated with Park Chung Hee's leadership (Im, 2011: 236-7).

<sup>11</sup> *Chaebols* are the conglomerates of companies around a parent company, such as Samsung, Hyundai, and LG.



That is, changes at the international level probably deserve prominence in terms of their ability to explain Park Chung Hee's implementation of the Yushin Constitution. Several events provide support to that idea. To begin with, there had been attempts of aggression and other destabilising actions by North Korea not long before (Seth, 2011: 408; Radchenko and Schaefer, 2017). In addition, it had also become clear that the United States intended to withdraw from Vietnam as soon as possible, something that had been discussed for some time, including in previous presidencies and notably that of Lyndon Johnson. Inevitably, this raised fears on the part of Park Chung Hee of a U.S. abandonment. This concern was also exacerbated by Nixon's announcement of the 'Guam Doctrine'<sup>12</sup> in July 1969 in which the willingness to withdraw some 20,000 U.S. military personnel from South Korea was enunciated (Seth, 2011: 407). Furthermore, in 1971 there was a rapprochement between the United States and China through President Nixon with Mao Zedong. Kissinger's visit to Beijing prompted Park Chung Hee to ask in front of Western media, "How long can we trust the United States?" (Oberdorfer and Carlin, 2014: 11). Park Chung Hee sought at the time to obtain assurances that the U.S. rapprochement with China would not affect U.S. relations with South Korea, but the response was delaying, which led him to say that what was happening endangered the survival of the South Korean people. Following the announcement of the 'Guam Doctrine' and the rapprochement between the U.S. and China South Korea begun the development of a nuclear program during the first half of the 1970s. However, it never reached nuclear capabilities due to the efforts and pressures on the part of the United States against proliferation by South Korea and all the support granted in terms of security (Siler, 1998).

## Conclusion

The question whether grand strategy and foreign policy can essentially be explained by structural factors, that is, essentially by international pressures, or by domestic factors may seem blurred. The argument here is that it seems reasonable to start by analysing the position of a specific country within the international system and consider that structural factors play a determining role in grand strategy and foreign policy decisions. However, structural factors alone are often not sufficient for a full explanation and agency also needs to be taken into consideration. This is the approach underlying neoclassical realist theory.

In essence, neoclassical theorizing considers that external constraints prevail when it comes to foreign policy decisions, similar to what occurs with neorealism. In that sense, it is a structural realist theory. Nevertheless, it also considers that there is a domestic component to the formulation and decision-making of foreign policy, consisting of intervening variables in the process. It considers crucial analysing the structural constraints that condition and constrain grand strategy and foreign policy decisions at the start of the foreign policy process, but it also views the processes through which domestic factors influence the process, namely due to differences in threat perception. The significance of the above is that it allows for strategic choice in terms of foreign policy decisions and escapes the determination of neorealist theory. This may reduce the

<sup>12</sup> The so-called 'Guam Doctrine' was intended to limit the U.S. military presence in Asia and make Asian countries more accountable for their defence.



parsimony of the analysis, but it allows for additional explanatory power in terms of understanding foreign policy choices.

The analysis of the presidencies of Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee provides support to the idea that there is a domestic component to foreign policy. It reveals that, in spite of similar international constraints, each president opted for different foreign policy options. This supports the argument, associated with neoclassical realism, that the structure of the international system plays a determinant role in constraining grand strategy and foreign policy decisions but that it is important to complement—rather than ignore—the influence of domestic factors that are specific to that country at a particular moment in time.

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