



Korea's Growth Seen from Abroad: Successful Nation-Building

A military reflection of the economic and democratic example of the Republic of Korea, 1953-2008. Colonel Louis T Dechert, President Korean War Veterans Association, USA, 2004-2008.

The historian C.V. Wedgwood once remarked, "We know the end before we consider the beginning, and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only."

I offer my comments and conclusions as one who was present at the embattled beginning of the Republic of Korea (ROK), and blessed, thus far, to see its present circumstances and future promise. In undertaking this consideration of "*Korea's Growth at 60 Years as Seen from Abroad*," I acknowledge that I am a soldier. In this light I view *Korea at 60*.

As I complete this appraisal, contemporaneous events attesting to the often termed miraculous survival and record shattering successes of the Republic of Korea are handily available: hour by hour Korean athletes triumphantly mount the dais in Beijing and the proud strains of *Aegukka* waft through the capitol city of an ancient regional foe of thousands of years, as other regional powers and allies watch, or, occasionally, share in Gold, Silver, and Bronze awards.

Broadening the horizon beyond China and the 2008 Olympics, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, is an honored Korean; the recently elected President of the ROK, Lee Myung-bak, is the former head of one of the world's leading industrial and commercial firms, presiding over a nation which leads the world in shipbuilding, electronics, and peacekeeping operations. He proposes imaginative breath-taking commercial projects on a scale of multi-continental land-linking from the English Channel to the Port of Busan. Astronaut Yi So-yeon returned from the orbiting Space Station in April. There is a revival of pride among the citizens of South Korea. And, the citizens of South Korea continue to charitably feed and sustain fellow Koreans enslaved in North Korea.

In contrast, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) remains bankrupt, starving its population, with the single accomplishment of having exploded a nuclear device built in large part directly proportional to the emaciated bodies of its starving citizenry.

I spent thirteen months in the 1950-53 phase of the Korea War, four years in the Vietnam War¹, three years in Border Patrol and security missions in the Federal Republic of Germany while it was in the first decade of recovery from the destruction which it brought upon itself in World War II, and, in all, many years overseas in Cold War locales.

Within the past decade I was finally able to formalize the question which first partially arose in my mind, in Vietnam, in 1975: *the United States had spent eight times or more of our national treasury, two to three times and many lives (our most precious resource), and very nearly four times as much time involved in assisting the Republic of Vietnam as we did in assisting the ROK. Yet, in 2008 the Republic of Vietnam no longer exists and the Republic of Korea is a leading world nation, one committed to freedom and democracy. **What made the difference?** The answer must be: **the Korean People.*** And that is the major perspective—NATION-BUILDING—which I follow in my review of ***Korea's Growth Seen from Abroad.***

An author in 1977 expressed the following thoughts about the nature and character of the Korean people. “Vigorous and outgoing, certainly—but far more aggressed against than aggressing. Invaded often, but hardly ever themselves invaders, the Koreans constitute the classic case of a people of spirit and individuality boxed in, and battered this way and that, by an environment and neighbors none of their own making.

“China and Japan have the normal complement of sins to their records, but surely none are more longstanding in each than how they have allowed their attitudes to and uses of that landbridge between themselves, the Korean peninsula, to traduce and mulct that peninsula’s people.”²

One of the world’s most ancient people groups, extremely cultish, the Korean people experienced again and again intrusions, ravages, and destruction at the hands of traditional regional and territorial powers of China and Japan as they maneuvered against one another for dominance. It is entirely probable that a major enduring consequence of these happenstances of history accounts for the modern successes in the building of a new Korea. Concerning the building of the nation after ca1970, one historian concludes, “. . . while they (China and/or Japan.ltd) slowly smothered and finally snuffed out Korean independence, the Koreans had at last begun to develop a true national consciousness, the first prerequisite for the building of a modern state.”³

At the end of the first three years of the Korea War⁴ the two exhausted parts of the Korean Peninsula (the North and the South, according to US-USSR agreements,1948)

¹ In my last tour of active combat duty I was the G3 for the 1st Field Force Vietnam (IFFV), with the ROK forces contingent under operational control. Thus I was able to see the transformation of the ROK Armed Forces and observe them as one of the elite combat forces to serve Freedom in the Vietnam War.

² Michael Keon, *Korean Phoenix: A Nation from the Ashes*, Prentice-Hall International, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977, p. 10.

³ Han Woo Keun, *The History of Korea*, The Eul-Yoo Publishing Company, Seoul, 1970, pp. 414-15.

⁴ Historically, technically, and actually, the Korea War continues interrupted by a ceasefire. Minimizing or obscuring this fact may severely handicap any appraisal of what the Republic of Korea has accomplished, 1948-

were in considerably worse condition than they had found themselves in 1948 when the two geographical governments and capitols were established.

Aside from physical devastation by the firepower expended by the parties to the conflict, millions of Koreans, North and South, had been killed, hundreds of thousands of Northerners had fled to the South and taken up residence there, and governmental, educational, medical, financial, diplomatic institutions and organizational structure, along with virtually all infrastructure, had been obliterated. In addition, several million Koreans conscripted for gang labor abroad by the Japanese and Chinese were still scattered about the Asian world.

The North had the USSR, Communist China, and the world-wide Communist Party in its various applications (Comintern⁵ and Warsaw Pact⁶, as two examples) to fill the void. In the South, *in the beginning, 1948*, the sole assets were a staunch anti-communist President Syngman Rhee, and the weak beginning rebuilding process of the ROK Army.

Two matters of consequence occurred which, I believe, formed the basis from which all the elements of today's ROK success flow. *First*, the stubborn Rhee virtually extorted a promise from the United States in the form of a mutual security alliance. From this Alliance, still strong and in effect 55 years later, the rebuilding of the ROK Army proceeded.

The *second* matter of consequence was initially a concept of the Americans, later of the UN, and today universally acknowledged as a key geopolitical concept: the conceptualization of undeveloped, third world, and finally *developing nations*.

After World War I (WWI) the world expected that the lot of the inhabitants of each nation would remain, or return to, what it was before that conflict. However, after WWII, a world concept, more or less modeled after the American concept, gradually developed concerning what were initially categorized as *undeveloped nations*.

Whatever the evolutions and changes in terminology over time, the concept has remained and is strong today: each nation and its people are entitled to develop to their highest potential—and the developed nations have a universal responsibility to assist them in doing so. There are numerous regional development, policy, trade, monetary, and aid organizations modeling assistance from the developed nations of the world

2008. Valid ceasefires are defined by virtually every military institution in the world as *the temporary cessation of hostilities*. Fifty-five years hardly qualifies as temporary. In the Vietnam War, for example, US Forces observed a Christmas Ceasefire each year, after 1965.

⁵ “The **Comintern** (Com munist Intern ational, also known as the Third International) was an international Communist organization founded in Moscow in March 1919. The International intended to fight ‘by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the State’.” Wikipedia

⁶ “Officially named the **Warsaw** Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (Russian: Договор о дружбе, сотрудничестве и взаимной помощи Translit.: Dogovor o druzhbe, sotrudnichestve i vzaimnoy pomoshchi), the **Warsaw Pact** was an organization of communist states in Central and Eastern Europe.” *ibid*.

helping those still under development. The UN has several development agencies also engaged in these enterprises. In fact, the decade of the sixties was designated by the UN as the *Development Decade*.⁷

Thus, President Rhee and his scattered supporters were presented with a nation-developing/building philosophy (although not characterized by that phrase then or now) which in ultimate terms would become the channel for the national consciousness which had evolved through the years of trials and sufferings undergone by the Korean people.⁸ As a later ROK President would observe, “Our past history seems at first glance to be more a record of misfortune than glory, but we also find in our past a strong inspiration, and we value even the misfortunes for the strong sense of determination they have nourished in our people’s hearts.”⁹ (Emphasis added)

Again, the situation in South Vietnam, at its founding has been described as “. . . Korea’s emergence from colonialism was an out-of-the-frying pan-into the fire operation; everywhere, social, administrative, commercial, and industrial vacuum or destitution prevailed.”¹⁰

In some respects the ROK in July 1953 began again with some less obvious favorable factors. Rhee’s desperate pragmatic stubbornness had locked-in American support. American leadership in the fledgling UN would be an advantage for several years. In addition, the US initiation of unilateral mammoth reconstruction programs, such as the Marshall Plan, would challenge other world powers as well as modeling such assistance pacts. Thus, the ROK was to undertake the nation-building process with a reliable source of developed world techniques, technical assistance, and foreign aid, as well as assistance of all sorts flowing from the US relationship—including military training, equipping, and assistance.

The author Keon, earlier referenced, has an insight into aid arrangements which is subtle, but which has been an assumption for US military assistance since at least 1969. He writes (in 1977), “Because the so-called ‘developed countries’ have been the overwhelming providers of the materials and expertise (and even the goals) of development, it is assumed that the power plants, irrigation systems, and health schemes developed through such aid must not only imitate those of donor nations, but also that sociopolitical structures and values within the ‘developing countries’ should be much like those of the ‘developed countries’.”¹¹

In 1983, as assistance programs for under-developed nations and developing nations were beginning to gain realistic momentum, Mr. George Champion, Former Chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank (1961-1969) provided a comment which I believe perfectly describes the aptness of the Korean people: “. . .there are many who believe that

⁷ Keon, *op cit.*, p. 33.

⁸ Han, *op cit.*, FN#3.

⁹ Park, Chung Hee, *To Build a Nation*, Acropolis Books, Ltd., Washington, 1971, p. 70.

¹⁰ Keon, *op cit.*, p. 36.

¹¹ Keon, *ibid.*, p. 7

money isn't the primary need of these countries and that true progress will be made through improved education and training; **the strength of a nation is a multiple of the character, energy, and ability of its people, not its natural resources.**"¹² (Emphasis added. ltd)

Right or wrong, and to varying extents, the fact is that the governments and people of the ROK and USA exhibit unique and distinctive relationship characteristics.

Human effort can only accomplish so much, never mind the lofty intentions and human and material resources brought to the task. In the case of South Korea, the tasks were so monstrous that even the determined Rhee and his impoverished citizens, along with their American helpers, could only wrest minimal progress. It is probable that at the onset they realized very little of the true magnitude of what they had to accomplish: Nation-building!

In the years 1953 through to President Rhee's ejection from office in 1960, the Korean people worked day and night in myriad programs and projects, in virtual misery. And at the end of the Rhee era they were still among the most impoverished in the world.

I have been fortunate to have been a frequent visitor to the ROK and an active participant in many aspects of Korean government and military life for the past several years. During this time I was able to talk with Korean men and women from all walks and professions who lived and worked building their nation, 1953-1960, and later under President Park Chung-hee's leadership (1961-1979)—actually my contemporaries, albeit half a world away at the time.

The common thread of remembrance in virtually all of their comments was of the absolute deadening, mind-numbing exhaustion of the hard work, the burdens of hours and exhausting experiences in absolute grinding poverty, seemingly without end.

During the Korea War period extending from 1950 to 1953, most of the hard labor in supporting the front-line fighting forces was performed by men assigned to the Korean Service Corps (KSC). Almost to a man, American Soldiers, Airmen, and Marines, still remember and comment on the sheer wearying stamina of the KSC men equipped with A-frames on their backs carrying incredible loads up and down the mountains of the peninsula at all hours in all weather conditions. Many a GI has remarked about seeing men with A-frames carrying large refrigerators (or similar loads) on their backs, often at a trot and uphill!

Those recollections of the Koreans by soldiers fighting the war best describe the entire nation of Korea, 1953-1979. The Korean people literally built their nation by the sweat of their brow and muscle power.

The world still marvels at the labor required to build the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids of the Nile, and similar works. I suggest that the sheer labor of the Korean

¹² George Champion, *Foreign Debts: A Proposal for US Banks*, p 28, the *Wall Street Journal*, Jan 11, 1983.

people, 1953-1998, building a leading Nation from virtually nothing, which has become the envy of much of the world, must also rank as one of the modern world's marvels.

Today, I find that many appear to take for granted what we see Korea 2008 to be—oft exclaiming “A miracle!” by means of explanation. Granting that the Almighty eternally does miraculous things, Korea 2008 represents what human, Korean, men and women, did by blood, sacrifice, and terrible demanding physical effort, during the years 1961-1979 in particular, marginally assisted¹³ by US aid and assistance. The Almighty worked by creating the national spirit in the individual Koreans and then providing human leadership equal to the tasks.

Sadly it has been my reasoned observation that the youth of Korea today have not impressed me as fully realizing and appreciating what was done by their elders. The on-going demands of nation-building may come to stultification and the Republic of Korea may consequently fall into the discard of nations which tried but failed, for whatever reasons, should this trend fail to be reversed.

All of my foregoing discussion brings me to conclude my appraisal discussing the working out and direction of American military assistance to the ROK and the effects which made Nation-Building possible.

As addressed, there are several characteristics that our two governments hold in common. In order to provide a better understanding of the oft inferred stops and starts and detours of the ROK nation-development, consider the American experience: “We need to remind ourselves of our own perilous, protracted effort to implant the torch of liberty in America. We need to recall that American Colonists began their resistance to harsher British colonial laws in 1763; that 12 years later the shot rang out at Lexington; that eight years of bitter struggle followed before the Treaty of Paris was signed ending the Revolutionary War; that six more years were consumed in our endeavor to forge a document of government which has stood the test of time, including a civil war. It took 26 years to forge our Nation . . . Freedom worth fighting for is worth the time and tears to build.”¹⁴

The Republic of Korea has built a Nation comparable to the United States in some sixty years, accomplishing—with US assistance and support of their nation-building programs and objectives—what it took the US itself over 200 years to accomplish! Before leaving this point—and to reinforce the conclusions to my earlier question **WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE?** (See discussion, page 2)—it was President John F Kennedy's stated

¹³ US Aid has never been constant to any recipients due to the annual appropriate processes of the US Congress and the annual budget actions of White House Budget officials. Additionally, in Korea 1953-1954, US Aid initially was a transference/diversion of the military appropriations already spent or being spent for supporting all of the UN forces to reconstruction and other aid for the ROK. After 1960, US aid gradually expanded, plateaued, and then leveled off at a lower level. In the six decades under review, huge cost increases of military hardware caused proportionately larger expenditures for fewer total items. In more recent years, the ROK has undertaken the manufacture of many large end-item weapons, under contract with US.

¹⁴ General Harold K Johnson, Chief of Staff, US Army, Armed Forces Day Speech, ca1966, message to the Army. Private excerpted copy, Colonel Louis T Dechert.

objective (to the Special Group Counterinsurgency, 1961) to support the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to the extent that the RVN would develop within 40 years to equal what the US had accomplished in 200 years.

US-ROK nation-building efforts 1950 through 1998 recognized what the US-RVN efforts did not: when nation-building activities are to be applied in the presence of an active hostile neighboring power, successful progress can only be made when there is a sufficiently powerful shield of deployed military strength and police and paramilitary elements—including a national combined intelligence effort.

Fortunately, during the years 1954-1979, in particular, the ROK had leaders who recognized that fact. During that span of time, there were: the so-called Second Korean War (1966-1969); the attack on the Blue House (President's Residence) by North Korean infiltrators across the DMZ to assassinate President Park (Jan 17-20, 1968); the Pueblo Seizure (Jan 23, 1968); the shooting down of a US Navy EC-121M aircraft over open seas with 31 US KIA (Apr 15, 1969); and Operation Paul Bunyan "Tree / Hatchet Incident" (Aug 18, 1976), perhaps the closest that the US-ROK-UN Command has come to all-out war since Jul 27, 1953.¹⁵ During the period 1960-1975 the US was concurrently engaged in the Vietnam War, as were the Armed Forces of the ROK for the later part of the period.¹⁶

On October 9, 1983, an assassination was attempted against then President Chun, Doo-Hwan and a large delegation of ROK Government Ministers during a visit to Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar). Twenty-one persons were killed and forty-six wounded. Almost all the killed and wounded were Koreans. The Korean CIA later established that the assassins were agents of North Korea. Finally, On October 9, 2006, the North Koreans exploded a nuclear device, demonstrating a new dimension of aggression.¹⁶

In more recent years Korea chose leaders who were at the least partially ill-informed/advised concerning the nature of the security threats and the active deterrence roles/operations of the US-ROK-UN Commands. Particularly after 1998 the political leadership of the ROK became almost myopic in cultivating and apparently attracting/supporting/serving the North Koreans with whom the ROK is at war. A visionary policy termed the *Sunshine Policy* was announced and applied, often appearing to be anti-military and anti-US.

Elements of the Korean population, keying on the public anti-American attitudes of ROK Governmental elements, began to conduct media events and demonstrations against

¹⁵ Major Daniel P Bolger, *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low-Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966 -1969*, Leavenworth Papers Number 19, Combat Studies Institute, 1991.

Global Security.Org, http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/paul_bunyan.htm, *Operation Paul Bunyan. "Tree / Hatchet Incident" 18 August 1976*, Alexandria, VA, current.

¹⁶ See FN# 4 and subtended discussion. "While gentlemen cry peace," the Korean Peninsula is at peace only in the only most elastic technical definition of peace. While the ROK longs for peace and reunification and daily offers acts of good will to fulfill those longings, the DPRK clearly follows the Communist stated philosophy that peace is only war by another means.

Americans and US Forces in Korea. It appears, to many, that the tumult of that decade of induced anti-Americanism has led to an element of disrespect for the RVN Armed forces, the universal conscription, and ROK military accomplishments in building and preserving the Nation.

During the *Sunshine Policy* it would have been well if the ROK political leadership had learned more about sunshine and applied that knowledge. Too much sunshine results in sunburn, sunstroke, and possibly heatstroke. The antidote to those injuries is sun screen lotion. In the nation-building situation in which the ROK is engaged, the national armed forces and allied forces provide that sun screen, extending the simile. The recently elected government of President Lee, Myung-bak appears to have pragmatically learned and is applying that lesson.

Generally nations are built, grow and prosper as Lines of Communication (LOC)—sea, air, river, canals, railroads, highways, pipelines, power lines, radio, television, telecommunications—expand. That was President Kennedy's development plan for the RVN, as noted earlier. In a developing scenario, 1946 through the present time, many of the under-developed states start with essentially nothing. Nationally, this was the case with America, post 1776; and it certainly was the case of Korea in 1948, and even more so in 1953.

In America, infrastructure development required educated engineers. Unfortunately all the established higher education institutions at the time were founded and existed first and foremost for religious instruction. For this reason the US Military Academy at West Point was first established. America's political leadership realized that educated engineers as well as other educated skills were essential to development.

Military trained engineers built the LOC, and American commerce and industry followed. Examples are many. Two might be easily cited: Lewis and Clark were military engineers, and their Corps of Discovery was a US Army formation, posted by President Jefferson to extend American Lines of Communication west from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. And, the first transcontinental railroad construction and completion, 1853-1869, was constructed mainly by civil war veterans and their officers, with thousands of Chinese laborers employed on the west to east construction portion.

The ROK has likewise been well served by the officers and armed forces trained since 1953 to protect and serve their nation. Whatever tasks remain for the ROK to forge ahead with nation-building it may depend upon its armed forces to be completely equal to the challenges.

I think that the Republic of Korea will survive and thrive well into the future. The mainstay of that survival, and even of the possible peace treaty and reunification, will be the professionally trained and equipped ROK Armed Forces who serve with pride in their great Nation. They may be depended upon—as they proved in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and in many other dangerous sites—to do their best for the

Republic. It has been a pleasure and great personal and professional reward serving with them.

Several months ago I was moved to provide my vision of what I then termed *The Real Korea War Veterans Memorial*. I close with that vision.

The Republic of Korea today is itself a memorial to American and Korean sacrifices which is written not in stone but on living hearts in our flesh and blood, and as such is the Supreme Korea War Veterans Memorial. For this reason, if no other, we must take every measure, devise and carry out every plan, and work until we can work no longer to build up, then build up again, and then again, our Mutual Alliance.

Should our Alliance fail because it progressively grew gray, then feeble, then went on life support, and finally disappear, then I suggest to you that something of our mutual National bodies will have died. Something which has energized us to accomplish the best there is through the past few years will have been excised. And, just as surely as our physical bodies will perish when the heart is ripped from them, the very essence of mutual accomplishment shall leave us, orphans as it were, to try to make our individual ways--rather than the Allied way--in a hostile world.

Korea is great not because the USA is great; the USA is better, or great, because Korea is great. That is the kind of relationships we have between ourselves and the ROK, my fellow veterans of Korea. We must preserve, defend, and ever build higher our relationship. Louis T Dechert, National President and Chairman, Korean War Veterans Association, USA, 2004-2008