

The South Korean Military: Influencing Perceptions on North Korea and the US Military

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Abstract

The South Korean military is the nation's most ubiquitous institution, but it remains an underrepresented topic in political science literature. Given that nearly every South Korean male from the ages of 18-30 must serve approximately 2 years in the military, this institution has influenced virtually every part of the nation's socio-political landscape. Through a series of interviews conducted over a period of a little over a year, I seek to determine the ways in which the Korean military affects the views of post-conscripts on the threat of North Korea and the permanent US military presence in South Korea. Herein I show that post-conscripts are more likely than non-soldiers not only to view North Korea as a greater military threat, but also to indicate a more serious interest in national politics after their service. Furthermore, I reveal that post-conscripts are more likely to hold favorable views toward the US military's active involvement in South Korea, despite the anti-American undertones that have plagued Korea since the 1980s. The findings of this study could fuel further research on how South Korea's military influences the composition of the nation's political landscape.

I. Introduction

In a world of ever-changing political landscapes, the South Korean military stands as one of the most constant and ubiquitous institutions. Relying primarily on the mandatory conscription of healthy males between 18 and 30, the ROK military affects all walks of life; everyone in South Korea has either served in the military for approximately two years or knows someone who has. The need for this deeply embedded military presence is clear, given the precarious nature of Northeast Asian political affairs, which are often dominated by China flexing its military might and regularly aggressive and unstable North Korea. Also, since the end of WWII, the permanent military presence of the United States in both South Korea and Japan has been a source of internal contention within both countries. It is not difficult to appreciate the need for mandatory conscription in South Korea, but the effect this conscription has on South Korean society and politics is intriguing in its own right.

Current literature on the South Korean military tends to emphasize gendered analysis, particularly with respect to how mandatory conscription disadvantages women who cannot serve the country in the same way that men can. Very little research exists on behavioral changes of post-conscripts outside of these gendered discussions. Research on anti-Americanism in South Korea is well documented, but most of these discussions revolve around Korea-US relations through nationalistic or economic approaches that are not directly related to the Korean military apparatus. Current literature on the South Korean military tends to ignore how a person's individual experience in the military can affect one's political views.

This paper will attempt to offer an additional perspective to the current discussions through primary research concerning the changes in post-conscripts' perceptions of North Korea as a threat and the US military presence in South Korea after their serving. Given that men

dominate South Korea's political arena, this research can potentially shed light on the way future foreign policy decisions are constructed. This paper will present the research considering the larger socio-political context of South Korea and its relationships with North Korea and the United States. It will start with an explanation of research methodology, followed by a review of literature concerning the Korean military as well as anti-Americanism. This paper will not focus on the results of a single study, but rather on how these results can contribute to a greater understanding of the South Korean political landscape. I argue that the military experiences of Korean nationals largely influence the extent to which North Korea is interpreted as a threat and how the US military is perceived.

II. Methodology and Definitions

The study incorporated in this paper was conducted from Summer 2012 to Spring 2014. Preliminary research was conducted in South Korea at the Demilitarized Zone and the Joint Security Area that divide North and South Korea, and at various museums including the War Memorial of Korea in Itaewon. The research involved in this study was primarily qualitative, focusing on in-depth interviews with 12 South Korean nationals conducted from February through April 2014. The overwhelming majority (75%) of interviewees consist of Korean males who had completed the mandatory two years of military service (post-conscripts). For the post-conscript group, only males who completed the two years of mandatory service were included; career soldiers were not part of this study. Throughout the paper it can be inferred that the term "Korean military experiences" will refer to non-career soldiers since conscripts comprise a large majority—75%—of the military.¹ The remaining 25% of interviewees consist of women and

¹ War Resisters' International. "Military Recruitment." 2007.

men who have not or are not required to serve mainly due to health disqualification. This latter group serves as a control to the post-conscript group, though post-conscripts were asked to compare their opinions from before and after serving.

I asked interviewees about their individual political views concerning North Korea, the likelihood of an attack from North Korea, foreign policy options, and the United States military presence in South Korea. The purpose of these questions was to determine whether individuals' beliefs changed as a result of their experience in the military, and the extent to which they changed. Though this research was not quantitative in nature, graphical representations will be used in an effort to consolidate similar responses.

III. Literature Review

Very little English literature discusses the societal implications of military conscription in South Korea. Insook Kwon is one of the few scholars who have explored this topic in depth, opting for feminist assessments of the conscription process. In her article, "A Feminist Exploration of Military Conscription," Kwon acknowledges that prior to her findings, most research on this subject pertained to the way conscription shaped "men's culture." Kwon urges for a more feminist discussion on conscription, focusing instead on how Korean society has different perception of those who serve and those who are unwilling and unable to serve. Kwon asserts that, in Korean society, there is a culture of self-sacrifice for the sake of national defense, one that ultimately shames those who do not complete military conscription. Though certain individuals might gain exemption from serving in the military due to health reasons or bribery,

Kwon argues that anyone who does participate in the military is often elevated to a position of privilege or power.²

Kwon introduces gender because there is a certain masculine connection among South Korea's political elite. Park Chung Hee's administration fomented this connection by providing post-conscripts with extra points on government service exams, giving men who served in the military a distinct advantage over those who did not. While initially it might seem reasonable to reward those who sacrificed their time and safety for the sake of national security, the extra points system inherently disadvantages women who cannot offer that same sacrifice themselves. Furthermore, Kwon argues that for Korean men, conscription embodies the quintessential idea of "becoming a man." Theoretically speaking, once a young man completes his military training he can now be a responsible and productive element in society (despite the fact that while he is serving he might be pitied.)³ This notion of growing up purely because of service in the military seems peculiar, since many men serve before even entering college, let alone working a full time job or starting a family.

Lastly, Kwon contrasts South Korea with countries that require female conscription, such as Israel, in order to assess the possibility (or lack thereof) of female self-sacrifice in South Korea. Israel is perhaps the most obvious example of mandatory female conscription, but according to Kwon, Israeli women are more easily exempted from service due to the fact that self-sacrifice for one's country can also entail motherhood. In Korea, women do not receive

² Kwon, Insook. 2001. "A Feminist Exploration of Military Conscription: The Gendering of the Connections Between Nationalism, Militarism and Citizenship in South Korea." *International Feminist Journal Of Politics* 3, no. 1: 26-54. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed May 5, 2014).

³ Ibid. 36

credit for their ability to produce offspring. Conversely military higher-ups have cited the female physique as a reason for why women should not participate in combat.

Kwon's research is significant in that it provides an eye-opening account of the way masculine narratives have ingrained their way into the Korean psyche via military conscription. Kwon ultimately acknowledges that men and women are perceived differently due to men being able to "sacrifice" for their country. However, outside of the civil service exam point system, she does not explore the ways this privilege affects the political landscape of South Korea.

Kwon's assessment of masculinity, feminism, and national identity is compelling, but it ignores a key aspect of Korea's military landscape that must be included: the US army. Though South Korea is certainly not the only country with a significant US military presence, anti-American sentiment in a strongly allied country is cause for further inquiry. Katharine Moon attempts to understand this paradox in her article, "Resurrecting Prostitutes and Overturning Treaties: Gender Politics in the 'Anti-American' Movement in South Korea." Moon frequently applies a feminist approach to nationalism and military politics in South Korea; her assessment of the role of Korean prostitutes in US military camptowns is particularly eye-opening.

Like Kwon, Moon acknowledges the masculinized cultural norms that persist in South Korea, astutely noting, "democratization and civil society development are not gender-neutral processes."⁴ In this respect, scholars tend to take two opposing perspectives— either women suffer from these masculinized norms, or they played a significant role in Korea's development. Moon attempts to reconcile these two perspectives in stating that while camptown residents are

⁴ Moon, Katharine. "Resurrecting Prostitutes and Overturning Treaties: Gender Politics in the "Anti-American" Movement in South Korea." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 1, no. 66 (February 2007): 132.

often treated as social pariahs, they have been integral in introducing anti-American discourse.⁵ One interesting example of the influence of camptown society concerns the ways in which South Korea interprets abuses by US military personnel. Moon states that in 1977, a female was sexually assaulted and brutally murdered near the Kusan Air Base, but the grisly murder went largely unnoticed by the Korean public.⁶ This incident can be contrasted with the Yangju Highway Incident of 2002, in which two middle school students were run over and killed by a US tank. According to a Korean newspaper, the *Dong-a Ilbo*, the incident not only spurred massive protests by civic groups, but also caused the National Countermeasure Committee to call for a revision of the US-South Korea Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and the potential closure of the US Army bases.⁷ While it can be argued that South Korea has a soft spot for students over camptown prostitutes, the difference in reaction between the two incidents clearly demonstrates a shift in the way US military presence is perceived.

Anti-American sentiment in South Korea is a popular topic for scholars studying US-Korea relations. Byung-Kook Kim has reviewed anti-American sentiment through a series of surveys in an effort to determine whether Korean citizens prefer continued US military involvement or withdrawal of troops. Kim cites age as a significant factor in his results, indicating that those in their 30s and those in their 50s or 60s were directly opposed to further involvement. Interestingly, Kim states that those in their 20s (the age group that comprises individuals who have recently completed military service) were far less in agreement regarding the US military. Kim attributes Korean males' conservative leanings to their experiences in the military, but offers little evidence for this rationalization. Meredith Woo-Cumings also tries to

⁵ Moon. "Resurrecting Prostitutes and Overturning Treaties: Gender Politics in the "Anti-American" Movement in South Korea." 136

⁶ Ibid. 137

⁷ Dong-a Ilbo. "The Ripple of the 'US Armored Car Fatal Accident' Expanded." 2007.

explain anti-American sentiment through an analysis of significant historical events that have harmed the relationship between the US and South Korea. She cites the Gwangju Massacre as one of these events, since the US Army's lack of response in protecting protestors helped diminish the idea of any sort of "special relationship" that they might have had. Furthermore, Woo-Cumings explores other incidents between the two countries that ultimately undermine Korea's sovereignty.⁸ Though this perspective on anti-Americanism is important, this paper will focus on the resentment toward the US that builds as a result of individual interactions.

Scholarship on the South Korean military acknowledges the obvious: that mandatory military conscription affects the socio-political arena. However, the ways in which the military affects an individual's personal political thoughts and behaviors is largely absent from most literature. This absence is notable because nearly every scholar that discusses gender in Korean politics acknowledges that men play a significant role in shaping the political landscape. Feminist literature regarding the military tends to focus on *why* men have a privileged place in society as a result of their military experiences, not on *how* these experiences shape future political thoughts and behavior. Looking at the ways women are affected by military conscription provides an incomplete understanding of Korea's political culture. Though anti-American sentiment in Korea has been a popular topic for many scholars, scholars like Kim often ignore military experiences as a factor, or assume that participation in the military uniformly causes an increase in conservative beliefs. The research below will attempt to analyze the specific ways in which military experiences affect a person's beliefs on national security and the US military presence.

⁸ Woo-Cumings, Meredith. "South Korean Anti-Americanism." *Japan Policy Research Institute Working Paper* (2003): 1-6.

IV. The South Korean Military: A Historical Perspective

Understanding the ways the military shapes viewpoints first requires an understanding of the role the military has played in Korean culture. Given the pervasive nature of the military in everyday life, it is reasonable to assume that the military is a unified body that acts on the will of the people and the state. Certain conceptions rooted in the military have been consistent since its inception, namely that communism and North Korea are “bad” and that capitalism and democratic countries like the US are “good.” These ideals are largely a result of the United States’ nation-building efforts. The US considered South Korea a vital participant in the Cold War, and it made significant efforts to instill Western, capitalist, and democratic values. However, both the nascent Korean government and military employed a heavy degree of centralization. Perhaps even more alarming, the US continued to support Syngman Rhee as president (originally chosen for his staunch anti-communist stance), despite his increasing despotism.⁹ As with any budding dictator, Rhee’s authoritarianism was legitimized largely through military might.

Thanks to student demonstrations and mass disapproval, Rhee was eventually overthrown in 1960, giving way to democratic elections. The presidency of newly elected Yun Bo-seon lasted barely a year, since in 1961, Park Chung Hee assumed leadership through a military junta. Interestingly, many of the norms that the US had attempted to promulgate throughout Korea remained intact. The student protests and election of Yun Bo-seon demonstrate at least a desire for a democratic state, and the haze of the Korean War made it clear that the two Koreas would be divided for the foreseeable future. Therefore, to understand Park Chung Hee’s ability to

⁹ Brazinsky, Gregg. *Nation Building in South Korea*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

initiate and succeed in a coup d'état, it is important to examine the military factionalization at the time.

A factionalized military lacks a strong hierarchy that creates a sense of accountability and loyalty that is present in cohesive militaries.¹⁰ These two factors are important since they represent loyalty to both the state and its civilians. When a military persists unchecked and without a clear hierarchy its desire for power over the civilian sphere allows strong leaders like Park to exploit these weaknesses and overthrow existing regimes. Additionally, a military hierarchy neutralizes individual officers' political opinions. Highly politicized militaries allow certain ideologies to prevail over others, and these ideologies might not represent the interests of the state or civilians. It is no wonder that one of Park's first priorities as de facto leader of South Korea was to rein in the military. All previous military factions were removed, leaving in place the *Hanahoe* faction that Park (and later Chun Do Hwan) used to ensure that the military would remain under his command.¹¹

Since factionalization is associated with instability and despotic rule, the relationship between cohesion and democratization must also be explored. Understandably, each leader in South Korea made significant efforts to control the military, but Kim Young Sam, the first civilian to hold office since before Park Chung Hee, was the first to employ democratic consolidation of the military. Kim purged military elites that had upheld the Chun administration, which allowed him to remove some of the corruption that had been building in the military for several decades. Later, Kim Dae Jung furthered these efforts by reestablishing civilian control

¹⁰ Woo, Jongseok. "Crafting democratic control of the military in South Korea and the Philippines: the problem of military factions." *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 4 (December 2010): 371-72.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 374

over the army.¹² Kim's efforts are key in explaining today's relationship between the army and civilian life in South Korea. In contrast to before when the dictators maneuvered the army to ensure their rule, today, the military serves the interests of the people.

Factionalization can also represent a potential security threat, since a highly politicized military is unable to unite under one single objective. Since South Korea is technically still at war with North Korea, a military with clear and stable objectives is necessary for national security. To understand the doctrine of the present-day Korean military, I asked post-conscripts who had completed their military service within the past five years about the kinds of formal and informal instruction they received as part of their service. Regardless of their service location or position, every respondent indicated that they received formal instruction about North Korea and the Korean War at least once a week. Many interview respondents likened this instruction to "brainwashing," and one interviewee claimed, "[they] try to force you to take on anger towards the North Korean military."¹³ It appears that a military can be politicized as long as all of its members are expected to adopt the same view. The military's narrative of North Korea being the enemy who started the Korean War not only helps eliminate politicized factions, but also provides a framework for enhancing national security, thereby serving civilian and state interests.

Though the military is certainly more cohesive than it had been in the 20th century, the doctrine that the military provides to its soldiers seems to have only transitory effects. In this study, participants were asked to identify themselves as conservative, moderate, or liberal, and then to indicate whether their experience in the army shaped these views. Virtually no respondents indicated a change in personal political views. One respondent even remarked that there was an understanding that everyone held varying political opinions and leanings, but that

¹² Woo "Crafting Democratic Control" p.376

¹³ Personal interview, March 2014

throughout their time in the military they would assume the views the military expected them to uphold. Interestingly, respondents who identified themselves as “conservative” indicated an increased interest in politics after serving, whereas moderate and liberal respondents’ interest remained steady. If conservative post-conscripts’ conservative views intensify after serving this could have potential implications in shaping South Korea’s political scene, and could therefore lead to foreign policy in line with this thinking.

V. South Korean Stance on North Korea

The South Korean government typically employs one of two opposing approaches in its foreign policy toward North Korea. The first approach entails an uncompromising stance toward the North. This approach is popular with conservatives in both South Korea and the US, and it aims to hold North Korea accountable for its aggressive behavior. Former conservative president Lee Myung Bak endorsed this type of hard-line foreign policy, believing that giving excessive control to North Korea allowed Pyeongyang to exploit South Korea.¹⁴ The second approach taken toward North Korea, often referred to as the “Sunshine Policy,” dominated South Korea’s foreign policy in the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations. Tellingly, the Sunshine Policy is sometimes referred to as “The Embracing Policy” in Korean, as it favors engagement with North Korea. The idea behind the Sunshine Policy is that engagement and cooperation— as

¹⁴ Moon, Chung-in. "Between Principle and Pragmatism: What Went Wrong with the Lee Myung-bak Government's North Korean Policy?" *Journal of International and Area Studies* 18, no. 2 (November 2, 2002): 1-3.

opposed to confrontation— should be employed in order to quell the North's aggressive tendencies.¹⁵

Both policies are heavily rationalized by their respective supporters and indiscriminately criticized by their detractors. Supporters of the Sunshine Policy cite unprecedented cooperation with the North, especially when North Korea agreed to hold its first summit meeting between the North and South in Pyeongyang. At the October 2000 summit, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il issued a declaration concerning humanitarian issues, the reunion of separated families, and reopening of borders.¹⁶ However, opponents of this policy are quick to cite a continuation of gross human rights abuses and suspicion of North Korea siphoning funds to bolster its nuclear program as evidence that engagement is ineffective.¹⁷

Like her predecessor and fellow *Saenuri-dang* party member Lee Myung Bak, current president Park Geun Hye has continued the tradition of having an uncompromising stance toward North Korea. While it can certainly be argued that North Korea has exploited the kindness of South Korea and other nations to receive international aid, there is an undeniable correlation between uncompromising foreign policy of the South and aggressive behavior of the North. Below is a timeline (Fig. 1) of North Korea's most significant acts of aggression since 2010, starting with the sinking of the *Cheonan* Navy ship. Though the nuclear test occurred under the progressive Roh Moo Hyun's administration, the bulk of 21st century aggression has occurred during Lee Myung Bak and Park Geun Hye's conservative administrations.

¹⁵ Hogarth, Hyun-key Kim. 2012. "South Korea's Sunshine Policy, Reciprocity and Nationhood." *Perspectives On Global Development & Technology* 11, no. 1: 99-111. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 5, 2014).

¹⁶ Hogarth. 2012. "South Korea's Sunshine Policy, Reciprocity and Nationhood." 103

¹⁷ Farely, Maggie. "U.S. Suspicious of Aid to North Korea." *LA Times*.

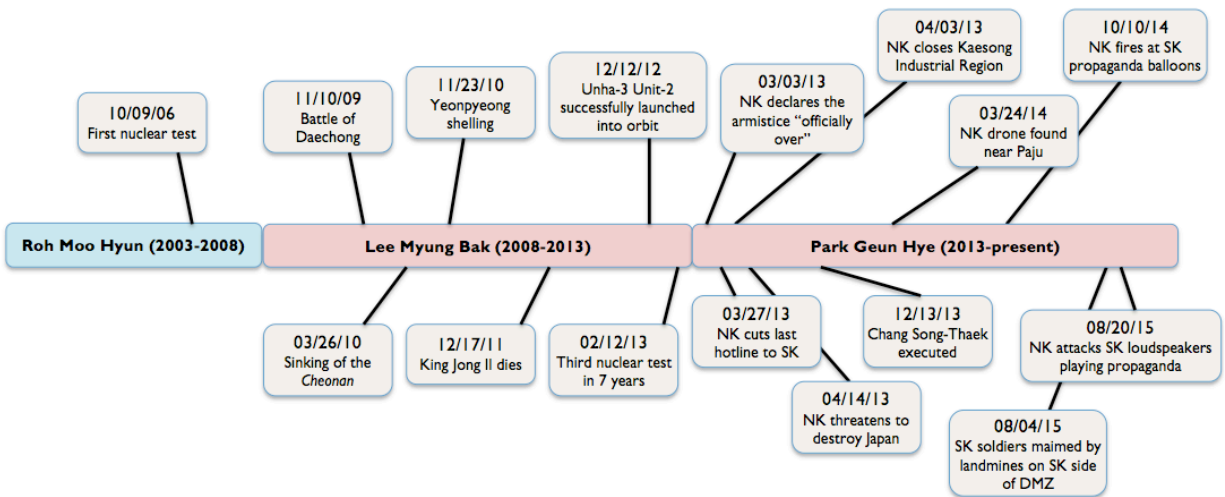
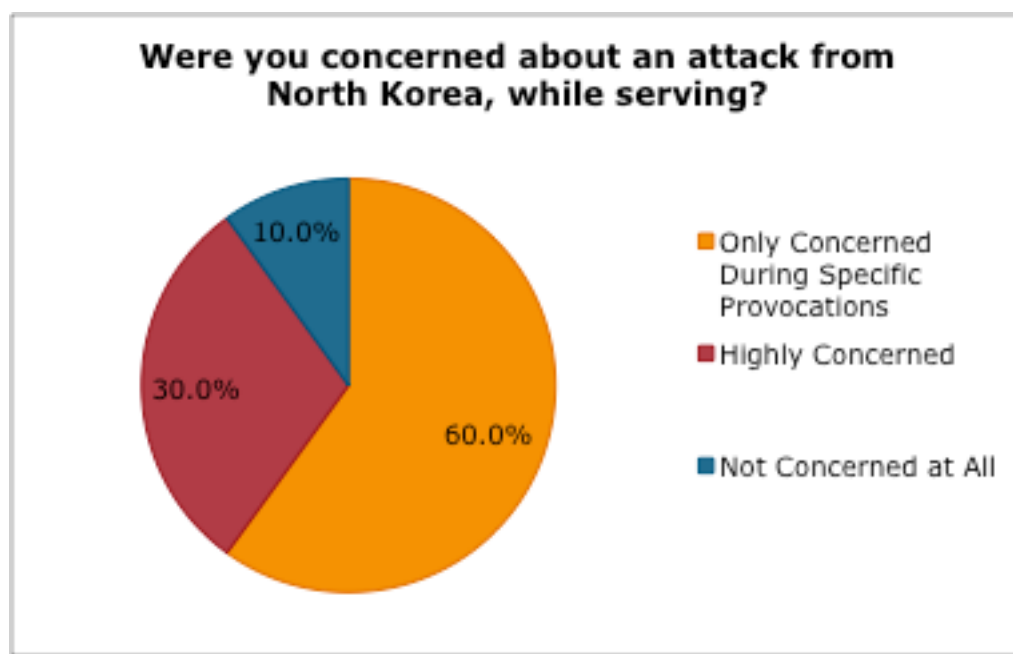


Figure 1- Timeline of major North Korean aggression since 2010. It should be noted that North Korea first began nuclear tests in 2006.¹⁸

The timeline above played an important part in this study, since participants were asked how they felt about the likelihood of an attack from North Korea (Fig. 2). Whether or not a significant event occurred during a participant's time of service was often correlated with the type of foreign policy the participant preferred. Most respondents indicated that while in "normal" times, the threat of North Korea hardly seems concerning. However, once a significant event occurred, the atmosphere of military changed dramatically. According to the participants, the most nerve-racking times included the sinking of the *Cheonan*, the *Yeonpyeong* shelling, and Kim Jong Il's death. One participant who stationed near the *Yeonpyeong* incident stated that his proximity to the shelling caused him to reexamine his previous notions about North-South policy. This participant (whose views are conservative) also cited this incident as a reason for his increased interest in South Korea's political stance toward the North.

¹⁸ BBC. "North Korea, Profile." <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15278612>.

While every participant who served during a time of North Korean aggression indicated that they perceived North Korea as a more imminent threat than they did before they served, primarily only conservative respondents advocated for harsher sanctions against North Korea. One moderately aligned respondent, who served when Kim Jong Il died, indicated that while aggression should be countered with more aggression, there is “no need for confrontation.”¹⁹ Therefore, the current findings of this study show that conservative participants who served during a time of North Korean aggression perceive North Korea as a greater threat and consequently prefer a more hard-line foreign policy. This is understandable since the South Korean army prepares itself for a potential war every time North Korea displays aggression. Participants who went through this experience noted that during these times soldiers would dress in full army garb and sleep with their weapons in case of more serious action. Since soldiers potentially risk their lives by serving, many participants expressed a desire to be more informed about South-North relations.



¹⁹ Personal interview, March 2014

Figure 2- An overwhelming 60% of respondents were concerned about an attack only during certain provocations; 30% were frequently concerned about the possibility of an attack; 10% were never or hardly ever concerned.²⁰

Liberals were more likely to indicate that they were never concerned about an attack from North Korea, or were only concerned during certain provocations. These participants believed that North Korean threats were empty in nature, and the likelihood of another grisly war breaking out was low. Interestingly, these beliefs echo those of the control group comprised of women and non-soldier males. It can be gleaned from these interviews that the everyday civilian in South Korea does not actively think about these issues. These findings can have a number of political implications.

Virtually every scholar acknowledges the patriarchal system that dominates in South Korea. As stated earlier, Kwon credits the military for giving males additional privilege in society, and this explains the prevalence of males (and to some extent, conservatism) in Korean politics. Here I argue for an alternative to this explanation: while the military does undeniably provide men with elevated status in society, the military also sparks political interest in conservative males, which could make them more inclined to actively engage in political processes. Some feminist literature promotes the idea that men and women are in their respective positions because of inevitable social forces. However, this view minimizes the individual sense of agency of active participants in the political landscape, and for men the military might serve as the initial push toward a political career. This study primarily concerned itself with recent post-conscripts, since their memories of the military are most vivid, but future long-term studies on Korean politicians will be helpful in substantiating these findings.

²⁰ Data from personal interviews

VI. Anti-Americanism and US-SK Relations

Lastly, it is impossible to discuss the South Korean military and its effects on society and politics without also acknowledging the significance of the United States military presence on the Peninsula. On paper, the South Korean and the US governments have had a tentatively positive alliance since the end of WWII. However, the relationship between the people of South Korea and the US military presents a fascinating paradox— despite the security alliance between the two nations, anti-Americanism has been simmering in South Korea since the Gwangju Massacre of 1980. Scholars have grappled to understand the persistence of both pro- and anti-American attitudes in South Korea, and as a result, two major trends prevail in existing literature. The first trend focuses on the unequal relationship between the US and South Korea. Because the US has had military bases throughout the country, there is a sentiment that South Korea has had to sacrifice some of its sovereignty in exchange for increased national security. Unequal economic relations also fall within this category, as they imply that Korea is inferior to the US. The second trend in literature concerns the “micro” interactions that occur between individual military personnel and the community around them. The most notable US base, the Yongsan Garrison, lies in the dead center of Seoul, increasing the potential for negative interactions. Though both of these perspectives assume opposite approaches for understanding anti-Americanism, both of them are intrinsically linked to the US military.

The US has provided Korea with various kinds of support since it began assisting in nation-building in the 1940-50s. Though the US has also been a source of economic support, the placement of American troops in Korea has been the most significant type of support. The US currently employs approximately 30,000 troops in Ground, Naval, Air, and Marine forces, the

bulk of which are located toward the border with North Korea. The US believes the placement of troops on the Peninsula is absolutely critical to ensure stability and peace in Northeast Asia.²¹ Since South Korea does not have a population large enough to fill a regular military, it satisfies this need through mandatory conscription, and of course, the US military. Not only does the US have its own troops in Korea, but it also maintains partial control over South Korean troops. Though top defense officials in both nations have discussed the possibility of transferring complete control of South Korean troops to South Korea (as per Seoul's request), the decision has been postponed until 2015. The *Chosun Ilbo*, arguably Korea's most conservative news publication, argues that repeated delays of the transfer have stirred public resentment and distrust.²² Since such disagreements in the overall vision for South Korea's military future exist on the uppermost tier of authority, it begs the question of whether such resentment and distrust has manifested in the lower levels.

To better understand the interactions between American and Korean servicemen, I asked post-conscripts about the degree to which they interacted with their American counterparts. Unfortunately, most interviewees had little to no interaction with American soldiers, despite most of their being stationed near American military bases in Gyeonggi-do. Interestingly, no respondents indicated any sort of resentment toward US soldiers, despite their having higher wages, better uniforms, and more sophisticated technology. Furthermore, most respondents agreed that the US military presence positively impacts national security. The US not only possesses more experience and more advanced technology, but the sheer numbers of soldiers in the US army is also beneficial for the South. One participant claimed that those who disagree

²¹ "Forward Together." *USFK Strategic Digest* (2014).

²² Chosun Ilbo. "Is Delaying Troop Handover Again a Wise Idea?." Accessed May 5, 2014.

with the idea that the US enhances national security were “absurd,” and that having US troops in South Korea eases the government’s military spending.²³

Though most participants agreed that the US military improves security in the region, the degree to which the US should be involved was a slightly more controversial topic (Fig. 3). When asked about whether the US should increase its military presence, only one respondent acknowledged that this could be potentially beneficial.

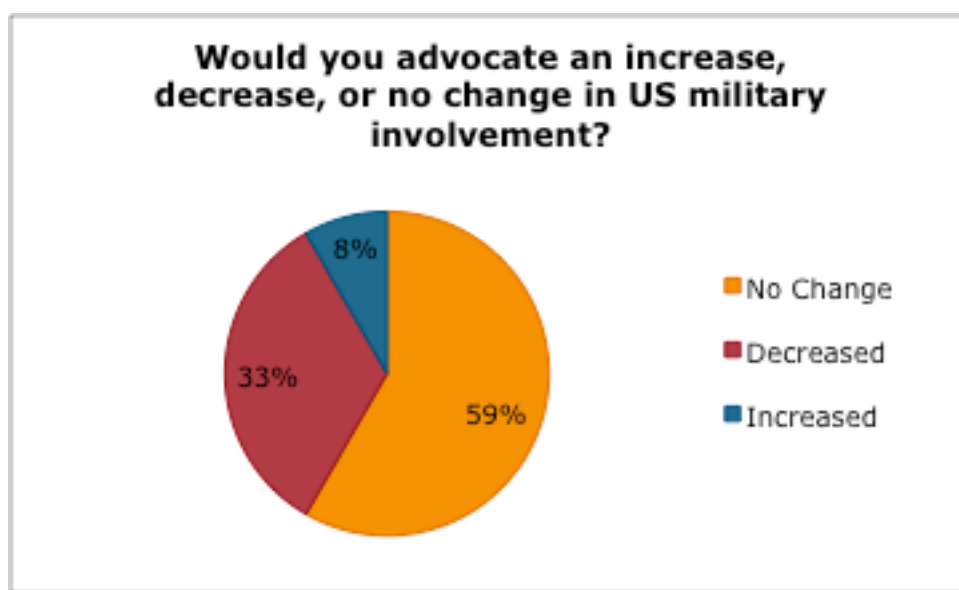


Figure 3- Roughly 59% of respondents argued for no change in the US’ current role; 33% advocated a decreased US military presence; a mere 8% called for an increased US presence. Many interview respondents were unsure of the extent to which the US military should be involved in Korea. As such, they were more likely to endorse the status quo.²⁴

Oddly enough, both conservative and liberal respondents advocated for a decreased role for the US army, though their reasons differed. Conservative respondents were more likely to cite cultural differences and incidents of sexual assault as reasons for decreased involvement.

²³ Personal interview, April 2014

²⁴ Data obtained from personal interviews

According to respondents, US military personnel have garnered a notorious reputation over the years for “disruptive behavior” in the towns surrounding the military bases. One respondent indicated that a revision of SOFA could be used to rein in unruly behavior of US military personnel. (Aside: SOFA clearly states that all US service personnel are subject to Korean laws and detainment procedures, should they be arrested. Most benefits are tax and import-related.)²⁵

On the other hand, liberal respondents insisted that the mere presence of the US military on the Korean Peninsula was sure to invoke North Korea’s ire. They reasoned that even the simple presence of a foreign military in the South could be seen by the North as an act of aggression, thereby fueling the antagonism that the military was meant to ameliorate. Given that conservative and liberal respondents largely agreed that the US should decrease its presence in South Korea (or in any case not increase it), the assessment of universal conservatism among post-conscripts made by researchers like Byung-Kook Kim is not necessarily applicable.

VII. Conclusion

The pervasive nature of the Korean military has had numerous societal and political effects. Understanding the ways in which the military shapes political ideals and behavior is significant in Korea because nearly every male must complete two years of military training. The patriarchal overtones that dominate the political system in South Korea warrant a study on the institution that has affected almost every politician at some point in his life.

Previous studies on the Korean military have focused on how the military elevates males to a certain status, thus disadvantaging the women who cannot serve their country in a similar manner. However, such a perspective ironically removes the agency of both men and women by

²⁵ United States Forces Korea. "SOFA and You." 2014. Accessed May 5, 2014.

implying that the gendered effects from serving in the military are completely inevitable. Though women are undeniably disadvantaged in society as a result of the conscription process, this does not fully explain the prevalence of men in South Korea's political landscape. I argue that one's military experience could serve as a catalyst for Koreans (particularly if they are conservative) to further their political engagement. Since Korean men who serve in the military have greater exposure to pressing political concerns than men and women who don't serve, this could help explain their increased political participation.

Secondly, it is vital to have an understanding of the ways in which individual Korean soldiers perceive North Korea and the United States' military presence. This study shows that there is a trend existing among conservatives and their perceived threat of North Korea, namely that conservative post-conscripts are more likely to view North Korea as a greater threat after serving in the military. These conservative post-conscripts also demonstrate an increased interest in North-South politics after serving, which could eventually lead to a more hard line foreign policy toward the North should these post-conscripts vote or run for office. Additionally, this study also demonstrated that while there is presently no budding resentment among Korean soldiers toward their American counterparts, conservative and liberal respondents alike favored a decrease in US military involvement. If post-conscripts want to continue their political engagement they will ultimately shape the relationship between the US and South Korea.

Since this study was qualitative instead of quantitative, further long-term studies are needed to substantiate the claims in this paper. The interviews in this study provide insights into the workings of the Korean military that are largely absent from the literature thus far. Additionally, because the nature of the conscription process in Korea does indeed have gendered implications, a comparative study between male and female politicians could help further

illuminate Korea's political landscape. Lastly, anti-Americanism will be a relevant concern as long as the US maintains a military presence in South Korea. This study provides an understanding of the way in which ordinary soldiers view the US military presence in Korea, but a study on military higher-ups could help explain why certain foreign policies are employed. Understanding how the US military is perceived by these soldiers could be helpful in determining the level of involvement the US will have in South Korea in the future.

This research demonstrates that the South Korean military affects all parts of the socio-political landscape. These preliminary findings will pave the way for further research on how Korea constructs its foreign policy, especially regarding US-Korea relations. Furthermore, this research provides a new perspective on gendered political participation. A similar study conducted on the political leanings of the few female soldiers who do participate in the military (albeit in limited capacity), could complement the findings presented here. The Korean military is far too integrated into the socio-political arena for it to be brushed off as a peculiarity of the region. Rather, this research indicates that effects of the Korean military are more influential than ever anticipated.