

The Impact of NGOs on South Korea's Decision to Dispatch Troops to Iraq

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This study focuses on how South Korea's internal societal pressures affected the decision making process on the agenda of troop dispatch to Iraq and how it affected the alliance relationship with the United States. Ever since South Korea has matured into a democratized, civil society, there are now numerous voices on almost every issue, including the US-ROK alliance, which had previously been immune from any heated public debate. Since the early days of the previous administration, however, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as a powerful player even in the realm of foreign and security policy decision-making which had remained hidden from the public eye. It is important to pay particular attention to the activities by the Citizen's Action against Deployment to Iraq, a coalition group of 351 NGOs established for the specific goal of influencing the government. This coalition group employed at least 17 different strategies to mobilize public support for their cause. This study ends with the conclusion that the Blue House which was wary of losing the progressives' votes in the then-upcoming elections, missed a window of golden opportunity by refusing to cooperate with the U.S. forces in Iraq. It could have increased Roh Moo-hyun government's bargaining power, reformulated the missions of the Korean forces and enhanced its capabilities. It is unfortunate that the US-South Korean alliance has not experienced any notable improvement despite Seoul's dispatch of an additional 3,000-men troop to Iraq. The US-ROK alliance relationship could further deteriorate because now NGO leaders aim to make the transfer of US bases to Osan-Pyeongtaek area impossible. It is high time for policymakers of the two countries and others who are concerned to maintain a high watch over the NGO's strategies and their way of using governmental subsidies to prevent further damage to the alliance.

Keywords: *Troop dispatch, Iraq, societal pressure, NGOs, Korea's Democracy, U.S.-ROK Alliance*

1. INTRODUCTION

On October 18, 2003, South Korea's Roh Moo-hyun government decided to send additional troops to Iraq upon the request of the United States (US) government. The U.S. had wanted the Korean (ROK) troops to be deployed to Mosul to replace its 101st Airborne Division. Nevertheless, there was clearly a huge gap between the U.S. and South Korea on what should be the role and the purpose of the Korean troops, and in the end, the final destination was changed from Mosul to Kirkuk and then again to Irbil, a Kurdish region in northern Iraq.

South Korea made it clear that the bill authorizing the deployment does not allow the troop to work under the US Command or participate in joint combat operations.

According to the bill, the Korean forces' mission is limited to civil affairs and post-war reconstruction. This has been extremely frustrating to the Bush administration because the US military, eager to relieve itself of the heavy burden of its army division, was in desperate

want of South Korean contribution in its stabilization operations in the key areas of the oil-rich northern state.

The so-called “Troop dispatch diplomacy” had been Seoul’s most effective policy tool to gain confidence of the US from which Seoul could benefit from as was the case of the Vietnam war where Washington needed allies’ participation in its not-so-popular war efforts during the 1960s.¹ Today, this no longer seems to be the case. While Seoul is faced with strong pressures from NGOs, the new elites in power do not hesitate to denounce the US war efforts in Iraq.

This study focuses on how internal societal pressures influenced the decision making process of troop dispatch to Iraq and how it, in turn, affected the alliance relationship with the United States. Ever since South Korea has matured into a more democratized and pluralistic civic society, there are numerous voices on almost every issue including the US-ROK alliance which had previously been immune from any heated debate in public. Since the early days of the Kim Dae-jung administration, however, NGOs have newly emerged as a powerful player even in the area of foreign and security policy decision-making. This study begins by explaining how the Roh Moo-hyun government walked the fine line between the external and societal pressures in handling the US request to send additional troops to Iraq. In the process of doing so, it is important to look into the NGO’s strategies, resources that they have available and the mind-set of their leaders. This study is then an attempt to open the ‘black box’ of the Korean decision making process. The second part is a brief overview of different positions of the ROK and the US concerning the size, the nature of the mission, and the timing of the troop dispatch and shows how these differences each affected the future of alliance relationship. Finally, this study concludes with a discussion of why we need to pay attention to such highly politicized NGO coalition and its activities.

2. EXTERNAL PRESSURE VS. SOCIETAL PRESSURE

Around July or August 2003, a rumor spread around Korea that the ROK forces might soon be sent to Iraq to assist the American forces already there (*JoongAng Daily* 9/9/2003).² This was nothing new since the US had requested the sending of ROK forces whenever the demand arose. According to a Korean source, the US had inquired more than ten times whether the ROK can assist the US stabilization efforts in Afghanistan during April and May of 2002 (*Chosun Ilbo* 5/28/2002). On May 27, 2002, General Tommy Franks, the Commander of US Central Command, manifested a clear interest in having a Korean combat battalion in Afghanistan (*Chosun Ilbo* 5/28/2002). In addition to combat forces, the US had shown interest in augmenting the ROK’s capabilities in Afghanistan including “mine breaker” vehicles, mechanic companies and medical units. The US military had also floated the idea of sending the ROK Special Forces group to the Philippines in early 2002 when they initiated a new kind of counter-terrorism operation (*Chosun Ilbo* 5/28/2002).

The US officials were extremely cautious when they made such a request because they were aware of the strong anti-American sentiment that was at large within South Korea. The South Korean military officials were equally cautious and often turn it down. The Korean

¹ See *Unequal Partners: ROK-US Alliance during the Vietnam War*.

² Korean government for the first time confirmed that the U.S. through unofficial channels requested that South Korea cooperate by dispatching additional troops to Iraq on September 8, 2003.

military complied with the earlier US requests by sending a 90-men Mobile Army Surgical Hospital Unit to Kyrgyzstan in 2001 and dispatching 670 military engineers and medical groups to Iraq in 2003. However, in both cases, the Korean military officials turned down the US request to send additional combat troops. The Korean military officials mainly put forth the argument that approaching the problem through official diplomatic channels would provide the US with better chances. They explained that it is very difficult for the Korean military to obtain the National Assembly's approval regarding the dispatch of troops.

In the case of Iraq however, President Bush himself was in the forefront to recruit Korean combat forces. On September 3, 2003, he invited the newly-appointed Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan to the White House to garner the Korean government's support in its stabilization efforts (*JoongAng Daily* 9/15/2003).³ Minister Yoon gave a reply that hinted at a positive outcome by saying that his government would study the US request. Presidential Advisor for National Defense LTG. Kim Hee-sang (Retired) also expressed his opinion that South Korea must soon accept the request.

However, a huge gap existed not only between the US and Korean government officials but there was confusion and clash among the Korean officials in terms of the size, the make up, and the timing of the troop dispatch. Dispatching troops to Iraq was a thorny issue for the young Roh Moo-hyun government since his largest supporting group saw such move as something in direct opposition to their belief in the principles of self-reliant defense and anti-war.

President Roh was put in an awkward position since he had to deal with two directly opposing forces of one, the external pressure from the US, and the other, the societal pressure that strongly opposed assisting the US war efforts in Iraq. There was no easy way out. The best he could do was to delay making the final decision as long as he could afford to. This was fully understandable since as a first year president he could not risk his yet-to-be ripe political life to satisfy an external, foreign power. His political platform was still largely based on the progressive group and younger generation open to more reforms who emphasized self-reliant defense policies. From their own perspective, the US-South Korea relations needed to become one that is on a more equal footing.

However, President Roh could not totally ignore the US request since South Korea was still heavily dependent upon the US in protecting itself from the potential threat of North Korea. His new role as the Korean President put him in a position where he could not but pore over the US position. In the end, President Roh opted to send troops but that of a much smaller size than what the US originally requested and at a much later moment than the US might have wished for.

This new Korean behavior can be interpreted in two ways. Some in the Korean policy circle regard this as a well-coordinated, diplomatic victory based on the fact that the additional 3,000-men troop Korea sent to assist the US is still larger than any other US allies' contribution excepting Great Britain. They believe that this is a historic turning point which showed the world that the ROK does not always acquiesce to US's orders.

However, it is not always easy to carefully balance the two positions. For those who criticize the soundness of this line of policy, the delay of the decision cost the President a golden opportunity to regain confidence of both the Bush administration and the American military establishment. Particularly, according to critics, South Korea's decision to refuse to work together with the US in its stabilization efforts in the Kirkuk area was a big mistake.

³ Mr. Bush invited Mr. Yoon to the White House for a 20-minute meeting on September 3.

They believe that while this non-compliance with the American wishes would save 60 to 70 Korean soldiers' lives the decision would also hurt the mutual trust between the two militaries that took over fifty years to be built.

The new power elite downplays the role of the US military as the foremost influential institution in US politics and foreign policy. American soldiers have fought with the Koreans side by side in the Korean and Vietnam wars and those actual combat experiences proved that Korean forces can be valuable in the grand scheme of American military strategy. Korea's combat capabilities and its availability as an allied force have been regarded as an irreplaceable asset.

The case of the US request for sending additional troops to Iraq has shown that President Roh was strongly swayed by the new power elite group that seeks to pursue an independent foreign policy and an alliance of equals at all cost.

However, the new power elite's emphasis on self-reliance and campaign of "putting the history back on the right track" is based on a system of subjective judgments and beliefs. For them, joining the Vietnam War was part of the shameful history of the authoritarian and anti-democratic government of late President Park Chung-hee. According to their interpretation of the history, President Park bandwagoned onto the Johnson administration's imperialistic and unjust war efforts in order to solidify its own political position. They believe that Rhee Syngman and Park Chung-hee used anti-communism as a tool for receiving the continued support from the conservative sector of the American society. With American assistance, they were able to prolong the lives of their authoritarian regimes by destroying the democratic principles and torturing those who stood to fight for democracy. Park Chung-hee, according to this line of history, justified participation in the Vietnam War as a way to pay the debt to the Americans the Koreans had borne from the Korean War. He succeeded in manipulating the public and forcefully injected a sense of gratitude into the whole society and consequentially, Korean youths were sent to fight in a foreign war as mere mercenaries and were sacrificed for no good reason.⁴

The revisionist view is currently shared by most of the 386 Generationers and this strongly affects the core decision-making group within the Korean government, the ruling party, the media, members of NGOs and advocacy groups.⁵ President Roh finds it extremely difficult to turn his back on these supporting groups and so he has no choice but to wholeheartedly support their cause. Although President Roh has managed to maneuver his way out of the US request to send a larger number of combat troops, the hard-core radical members of NGOs and progressive politicians remain critical about his decision to dispatch 3,000-men troop to Iraq. Some members of the Democratic Labor Party organized a hunger strike to protest against President Roh's decision and many labor unions and the coalition of 351 civic groups were exerting strong pressures to the government to reconsider its decision.

⁴ For more detailed description of the roots of the leftist movement in Korea, see Hahm (2005: 61).

⁵ So-called "386 Generation" stands for those progressive members who are in their 30s, attended college during the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s. They have become the new power elite in Korean politics and have begun introducing new ideas and policies that were once considered too leftist and hence taboo.

3. NGO STRATEGIES, RESOURCES, AND THEIR IMPACT

“Citizen’s Action against Deployment to Iraq (hereafter Citizen’s Action)” was established on September 23, 2003, as a scheme to systematically oppose the government’s decision to send troops to Iraq. They have made us of at least 17 different strategies to mobilize citizen’s support to their cause as is indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency and Type of NGO Action against Deployment

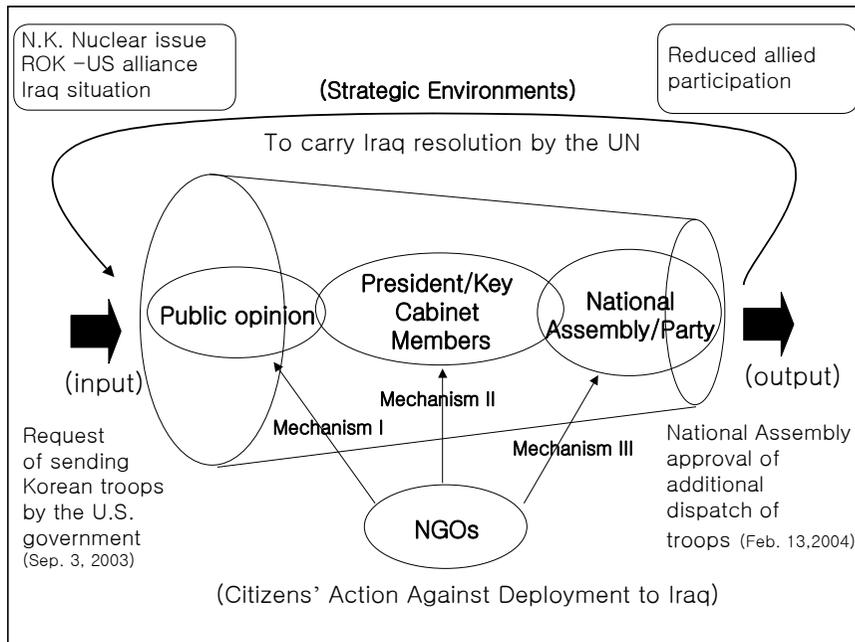
Type of Action	Direct					Indirect											
	Formal		Informal			Distributing Information						Mobilizing the Crowd					
	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥	⑦	⑧	⑨	⑩	⑪	⑫	⑬	⑭	⑮	⑯	⑰
Frequency	2	1	2	5	6	1	33	22	5	2	21	4	25	12	5	7	5

- ① Interview
- ② Submitting Memoranda
- ③ Sending Questionnaires
- ④ Protest Visit
- ⑤ Attending Conferences
- ⑥ Lecture
- ⑦ On-line Dissemination
- ⑧ Issuing Statements
- ⑨ Holding Conferences
- ⑩ Holding Exhibitions
- ⑪ Press Interviews
- ⑫ Signature campaigns
- ⑬ Assembly and Demonstration
- ⑭ Street Marches
- ⑮ Sending Letters/Petitions
- ⑯ Taking Polls
- ⑰ Hunger Strike

From September 23 to October 18, 2003, when President Roh finalized his decision to send troops, the NGOs increased the number of their activities and thereby successfully increased the pressure level felt by the President and his advisors. Although President Roh had basically decided to send troops in principle, he was hesitating on other issues and therefore was unable to decide on the details. It was National Security Council (NSC) Chief of Staffs Lee Jong-suk instead of President Roh who announced that the number of troops would not exceed 3,000. His announcement was regarded as a guideline and this remained unchanged. “Citizens Action” organized more than ten demonstrations in the streets during the period, distributed a leaflet among the people, and paid frequent visits to the members of the Committee of National Defense in the National Assembly. “Citizen’s Action” also developed a variety of pro-active measures to change the nature and the ways of US-ROK military cooperation. A little more than 30% (48 out of 158) of their activities were carried out in the first month of their operations.

As indicated in Figure 1, “Citizens Action” went about in three different channels to influence the decision. Mechanism I is their route to influence public opinion, while Mechanism II is the route to the highest office at the Blue House and the cabinet members through official channel of Special Advisor for the President for Political Affairs and Special Advisor for the President for Civil Participation. It was the first time that NGO leaders could meet officially with Presidential Advisors at the Blue House to discuss a national security issue. Mechanism III was a route to influence the National Assembly members and political parties. They checked voting records and monitored the activities of each Assembly member.

Figure 1. Three Mechanisms (Routes) NGOs employed to Influence Decision-Making



After extensive research of their activities, this study finds that public opinion is acutely divided and NGO activities did not successfully change those conservatives or realists who firmly believed that sending troops would best serve the national interest. NGO leaders tried to capitalize on the human right violations at the Abu Ghrib as grounds to mobilize further anti-dispatch movement. However, public opinion stabilized and became immobile once the United Nations (UN) adopted the resolution to assist Iraq. According to the poll conducted by *Hankook Ilbo* on October 23, 2003, 64.9% of the pollsters favored the idea of sending additional troops (*Hankook Ilbo* 10/23/2003). It was a rather surprising result because respondents voted in favor of sending troops while they fully recognized that additional troop included combat soldiers. The approval rate was much higher than a previous poll where only 45.5% favored the sending of the troops to Iraq (*Hankook Ilbo* 10/23/2003). It was also interesting to note that the death of a Korean civilian in Baghdad did not do much to change the atmosphere in Korea. Actually, the tragic death of Kim Sun-il increased public support for sending troops. The public urged the government to not to yield to terrorists' demands. In the end, Mechanism I proved only partially successful.

With regard to Mechanism II, Presidential Secretaries have paid attention to the NGO's appeals and have tried to explain their situation. The difficulties that the Blue House faced were well understood by the NGO leaders. They therefore never challenged the President to the extreme even though the President had not fully accept the NGO's demand. It is interesting to note that the NGOs themselves were divided on whether or not they had to allow President Roh more flexibility. Some radical groups such as the Citizen's Coalition for

Democratic Media did criticize the ambiguity of President Roh's position and his advisors, and called for an all-out attack on the US position.

With respect to Mechanism III, NGO strategies were found to be very effective in influencing the individual members of National Assembly. Those members were worried that their vote to send troops to Iraq would render them losers in the coming April 2003 elections. NGOs called on individual member's office and organized protest in front of the Committee Chairman's residence from time to time. NGOs sent their leaders to major TV talk shows and nightly news-type shows to promote their causes and disseminated their views through the Internet as well.⁶ Music concerts were organized to attract the younger generation who support the Roh Moo-hyun government. Even movie directors and rock stars were mobilized. Candle light vigils at Kwanghwamoon Street became their weekend routine to express the lay people's discontent over the government decision.

Their influence has had certain limitations. First, the NGO's initial positions never changed regardless of the constantly-changing environment. Once the government announced that less than 3,000-men would be dispatched, people more or less began to accept it. They also began to worry that it might cause side effects by refusing to send a larger number of troops and delaying the decision all the while. After passing the point of October 27, when Lee Jong-suk capped the ceiling of the size of the troops, the NGOs' influence receded. Since then, their demonstrations and many of the other options were used as a defense tactic of protecting those who oppose the US position in recruiting additional combat troops.

The intensity and the frequency of demonstrations drastically declined once the Korean troops settled in Irbil. There were, of course, moments when public opinion erupted. When the US President Bush left out the name of the Korean President in expressing his appreciation for those leaders who helped to the US by sending troops to Iraq, the NGO coalition group did not respond by issuing a statement. NGO leaders wished that the rift between the ROK and US would result in an early return of soldiers back home. The US decision to prolong the end point of the withdrawal of the 2nd Infantry Division forces by 2008 at the 11th Future of the Alliance (FOTA) meeting and the visit of US Secretary Rumsfeld to the ROK headquarters in Irbil greatly ameliorated the situation in Seoul by quelling the critics.

In summing up, NGOs have been influential in forcing the ROK government to delay the decision and reduce the size of the troops dispatched. Yet, their resources were limited; most of their budget had come from governmental subsidies as indicated in Table 2. And this is a critical weakness of the source of Korea's democracy. It is highly unlikely that the NGOs would dare challenge the government if they are financially dependent on the government. To explain in detail how such system came into being, we need to go back in time. It was the previous President Kim Dae-jung who decided to actively subsidy the NGOs. The rationale behind such policy was that since private donations and funds were almost non-existent in Korean society there was no way but to assist those reform-minded NGOs if the Korean government wanted to promote democracy. Unfortunately, his decision resulted in deeply politicizing the NGO movement as more radical progressives joined the mainstream political process through NGOs to support the then President's ideas and policies that were once considered too leftist. The two most crucial ideas in this aspect were the anti-*chaebol* reforms

⁶ See www.antipabyung.jinbo.net. "Antipabyung" means against dispatch troops and "Jinbo" stands for progressive in Korean.

and the “sunshine policy” toward North Korea (Hahm 2005: 63). The NGOs managed to dominate the political agenda by initiating a national debate on removing the US bases in downtown Seoul and amending the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Some of their leaders used anti-Americanism as a tool for mobilizing support to their causes. And accordingly, the “Citizen’s Action” should not be regarded as an ordinary NGO coalition because its board members include famous opposition leaders such as Kwon Young-gil and Roh Hoe-chan of leftist Democratic Labor Party. They have been highly critical of the unequal aspects of the alliance partnership with the US.

Table 2. Subsidy for NGOs by Each Department

Department	Number of NGOs	Budget for NGOs (Million Won)
Ministry of Finance and Economy	109	1,880
Ministry of Education & Human Resources Development	1	30
Ministry of Unification	1	450
Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs	182	15,000
Ministry of Gender Equality	77	2,000
National Human Rights Commission of Korea	61	1,150
Ministry of Culture & Tourism	3	700
Ministry of Health and Welfare	36	8,520
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade	8	2,530
Ministry of National Defense	1	2,900
Ministry of Environment	3	200
Ministry of Labor	2	2,190
Ministry Construction & Transportation	1	390
The Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs	6	100
Rural Development Administration	3	1,520
Government Information Agency	32	830
Korea Press Foundation	2	50
Korean Broadcasting Commission	37	750
Total	565	41,190

4. BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS MODEL REVISITED

Major players involved in the decision-making process have shown different positions with regard to the issue of dispatching additional troops to Iraq. First, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the Army were the most supportive governmental players to the idea of sending combat forces to Iraq from the very beginning. They also believed that it would be better to send a larger force should adequate funds be provided.

Of course, opinions within the military varied as to the appropriate size of the forces. As Presidential Advisor for National Defense Kim Hee Sang suggested, many army leaders thought that small troops were not appropriate in dealing with the missions requested by the US (*Dong-A Ilbo* 9/14/2003). They understood that there was skepticism about such large-scale dispatch within the government and were concerned about the public outcry which would ensue if larger troops were sent. The MND quickly finished its internal review in early September 26, 2003. MND suggested a compromised solution of dispatching elite troops consisting of 5,000 soldiers from the southern region of South Korea so as to not minimize the deterrence capability against North Korea (*Dong-A Ilbo* 9/26/2003).

The MND did not disclose its position on the issue. General Kim identified three major reasons for supporting the sending of combat forces: first, South Korea would have more leverage when negotiating with the US on the issue of the realignment of American troops stationed in Korea. Second, it would also give Seoul an advantage in dealing with the issue of the North Korean nuclear standoff. Third, it could bring economic fringe benefits to Korea by enabling Korean private companies' participation in reconstruction operations in post-war Iraq. It might also guarantee a stable petroleum supply (*Dong-A Ilbo* 9/14/2003). Most Army high-ranking officers agreed with his observation and also, perhaps owing to past experiences of working together with the US, the Korean military members tended to view this kind of request as an opportunity.

Second, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) wanted to save its face on the fragile state of the ROK-US alliance. Minister Yoon Young-kwan had been supportive of the idea of sending troops because this could possibly be the opportunity to restore the credibility and deal a decisive blow to the skeptics among the American public as well as opinion makers who questioned Korea's role. Many high-ranking officials in the MOFAT worried that if Seoul declined the US request, more Americans would begin to discount Korea in the American security strategy in Northeast Asia. Key officials of the MOFAT maintained that the decision should be made no later than mid-October since President Roh was to deliver Korea's position clearly to President Bush at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit on October 20, 2003 in Bangkok, Thailand.

Ministry officials also believed that Korea should not be left behind when more and more of the world's nations were participating in the post-war operations. In addition, the unanimously-approved UN Security Council resolution to support a multinational effort to reconstruct Iraq on October 16, 2003, was viewed as a green light for the government to respond positively to the American request for additional troops.

Third, the Blue House and the NSC did not share the optimism of these two previously-discussed ministries. Their primary concern was the possibility of putting troops in dangerous situations and its potential negative impact on President Roh's public ratings. For them, this was an important decision that required careful deliberation. In the end, they advised President Roh to remain a vague position and to repeat that he needed more time to make such an important decision.

Ra Jong-yil, the National Security Advisor, hinted that sending combat troops was unthinkable in his interview with CBS Radio by saying that "because the war in Iraq is over, we are not thinking about sending troops that might be involved in violent conflicts" (*JoongAng Daily* 10/1/2003). Blue House Aides also wanted to minimize the size of the troops to be sent, taking into account significant public objections to the deployment. The Blue House became sensitive to the term "combat troops" after it became clear that Washington wanted troops similar to the Polish-led multinational, light infantry division.

Defense officials however were concerned that a multinational force would cause a serious communication problem. They preferred to have their own command, control system and independence of operation. Moreover, military officials strongly argued that dispatching a complete division of up to 10,000-men would provide more advantages for the security of the Korean forces. They also argued that versatile Special Forces Units would be particularly efficient in those operations because they had been trained in a variety of dangerous circumstances.

The Blue House and the NSC, however, took a grave assessment of the Defense Ministry's plan. Sending those elite forces would jeopardize the concept that South Korean troops were to be non-combat peacekeepers. What they feared the most was the possibility of rising domestic protest opposing the sending of additional combat troops to Iraq and the consequent loss of support from the young and the progressives. Moreover, sending an entire division would place too great a financial burden on Seoul, according to those officials.

On October 18, 2003, soon after the NSC meeting, President Roh finally declared his decision to send troops to Iraq but again managed to maintain ambiguity by failing to show a clear schedule. According to Cho Young-kil, the Minister of National Defense, his government would present a more detailed plan after consulting the US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who was to visit Seoul for the ROK-US Security Consultative Meetings (SCM) on November 17, 2003 (*Dong-A Ilbo* 10/17/2003).

Although they had decided to send troops to Iraq, discussion within the policy circle was drifting and they had a hard time in finalizing the details. All the while, President Roh worried that young voters would resent his decision and that would politically hurt him.

In the third week of September, the "Citizen's Action" organized mass public protests along with college students. The coalition consisted of 351 non-government organizations including the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Politicians from both sides were wary of this kind of public protest because it would likely affect the upcoming election of 2004.

Some key officials at the Blue House tried to create linkage between the issue of sending troops to Iraq with the softening of the Bush administration's policies on North Korea (*JoongAng Daily* 11/18/2004).⁷ When they realized that this would not prove to be a precondition for sending troops, they finally decided to reduce the size of the troops.

A senior official at the NSC said on October 27, 2003, that the size of the new South Korean deployment would not exceed 3,000 (*JoongAng Daily* 10/28/2004). However, Lee Jong-suk's announcement to the press had not been consulted with the members of the MND and the MOFAT. One official from the MND complained that the minimum size of the troops needed to carry out an effective mission in Iraq could very well surpass 3,000 soldiers. Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan commented that the number should be tentatively taken as "an idea" among many (*JoongAng Daily* 10/30/2003). Defense Minister Cho Young-kil and the newly appointed Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Ban Ki-moon also said that it was too early to talk about the exact number of soldiers (*JoongAng Daily* 10/30/2003). However, the suggestion of a cap of 3,000 troops came after President Roh ordered his aides to refrain from making public comments on the deployment, a fact that some officials took as an indication that the number reflected the President's position on the issue.

⁷ On September 26, 2003, Powell was infuriated when he met Yoon in New York. Yoon was trying to link the issue of sending troops with the Nuclear problem by saying that Seoul would not send troops to Iraq unless the US softens its stance against North Korea.

5. RECONFIGURATION OR DISMANTLING: ALLIANCE IN QUESTION

American senators Joseph Biden, Richard Lugar, and four others introduced a resolution to thank South Korea for its decision to send troops to contribute to American efforts to the stabilization and reconstruction in Iraq (*JoongAng Daily* 11/4/2003). However, the chasm was beginning to widen when the Korean delegation sat down together with their American counterpart in Washington, D.C. to discuss the further details of dispatching Korean troops to Iraq during November 5-6, 2003.

In the negotiation, the US officials strongly expressed their interest in having at least 5,000 –men, a “stabilization force” consisting of two regiments that might take charge of securing the public order in northern Iraq. According to the Reuters, the US had asked for one Korean combat division that could replace the US's 101st Airborne Division stationed in the Mosul area of northern Iraq.

However, the Korean delegation hardly budged because the NSC not only capped the ceiling at 3,000 but also ruled out the possibility of any combat role. Soon after the meeting in Washington, D.C. the US announced the rotation of the 101st Airborne Division by its own 82nd Airborne Division and thereafter, the possibility of Korean troop being dispatched to Mosul officially ended.

President Roh Moo-hyun finally delivered his position to Secretary Rumsfeld when he visited Seoul for the annual SCM meeting on November 17, 2003. Secretary Rumsfeld, however, warned that the Korean troops would have to be responsible for their own safety and addressed the potential danger that lurked in Iraq (*JoongAng Daily* 11/19/2003).

Key Korean officials within the Blue House believed that President Roh's decision not to send more than 3,000 men against the wishes of the Bush administration was a step forward in its path to self-reliant foreign policy and equal partnership alliance that they had long cherished. They also believed that sending more than 3,000 soldiers, the third largest contingent among the allies, was enough to save face for President Bush.

Once the decision was made, the Blue House exhausted all its efforts in persuade the members of the National Assembly to have the bill of deployment passed by the end of December. Five members of an advisory panel from the National Assembly who went to Iraq for a fact-finding mission, upon their return home suggested to President Roh Moo-hyun that future deployment should include both combat and non-combat forces and advised for an extra precautionary measure to prevent facing Iraqi hostility by distancing itself from Washington.

Meanwhile, the National Security Advisor Ra Jong-yil hinted that Seoul needed more time to select, equip, and train the soldiers and therefore, suggested that he did not expect that the troop dispatch would be made before the National Assembly Election which was to be held on April 2004.

Seoul finalized a decision to deploy a 3,000 military contingent of combat and non-combat personnel to an unidentified region of Iraq on December 17, 2003. With “Seohee” (engineering unit) and “Jema,” (medical unit) that were already deployed in April 2003, the total number of the force would amount to 3,700.

Strangely, the destination for Korean troops had not yet been decided. However, Korean forces wanted to send its contingents to Kirkuk among many other candidates, including Tal Afar, Karaya in northern Iraq, and Nasyriya in the south.

With the troop dispatch consent bill passed in the National Assembly on February 13, in which 155 voted for and 50 against, 7 abstaining in a vote where 212 members were present out of 271, the Korean government officially established the Iraq Peace Rehabilitation Division on February 23, 2004. The so-called Zayituun Unit (Zayituun means “olive” in Arabic) began training for their non-combat roles (*Dona-A Ilbo* 2/13/2004). Meanwhile, the question remained of how to guarantee safety of its forces from the terrorist attack without jointly working with the American forces stationed in the same area.

Around March 2004, a rumor that with only a few weeks left before the dispatch, there was a discrepancy of opinion on the matter of a US military presence in the areas in Iraq where the Korean troops would be stationed began to circulate. The US government informed Seoul that due to the rising violence in the northern region of Kirkuk, some US military forces would remain in place even after the arrival of the Korean soldiers. American officials believed that the region was too crucial to leave in the hands of non-combatant Korean forces and suggested that South Korea work with American forces jointly in the area (*JoongAng Daily* 3/18/2004).

South Korea and the US failed to agree on the specifics of the dispatch of Korean troops and the dispatch therefore had to be delayed once again. However, the Korean refusal to the US offer to leave the US forces in the region to assure the safety of the Korean soldiers had some negative spin-offs among the US military officials and made them question the utility of Korean forces as a key ally.

It is understandable for South Korea to refuse to work together with the US since the bill approved by the National Assembly specifically stated that Korean troops would carry out reconstruction missions independently. However, it could also prove to be a fatal mistake to give up the opportunity of joint operations with the American forces. And joint operation in the area outside the Korean peninsula would give the ROK a strategic advantage to cultivate a new kind of mission in the future and also could provide a good opportunity to upgrade its military capabilities.

However, South Korean reluctance to accept the US offer of joint stationing and joint operation in the Kirkuk area was solely based on the Ministry’s estimation that joint stationing would cause 30 to 70 casualties and it would be an unbearable political setback for the Blue House. They believed that the Roh government could not survive through the angry reaction of the progressive and radical supporters if casualties were reported from Iraq. Avoiding casualties should be the first priority for those advisors if they indeed wanted to win the forthcoming National Assembly election.

At a meeting in Baghdad on March 18, 2003, the United States finally accepted the Korean request to change the deployment destination (*JoongAng Daily* 3/19/2004). On March 19, Defense Minister Cho Young-kil reported to Prime Minister Goh Kun, the acting President that South Korea was considering two other destinations, the northern Kurdish provinces of Irbil and Sulaimaniya and the central-southern areas of Najaf and Qadisiyah.⁸ He said that the government would make a decision within two weeks after further negotiations with the US (*JoongAng Daily* 3/19/2004).

The United States asked South Korean troops to go to either Irbil and Sulaimaniyah, a Kurdish territory in northern Iraq, relatively safer than areas with large Arab populations. However, South Korea preferred to deploy the contingent in the central-southern provinces,

⁸ At the time, the National Assembly passed an Impeachment Bill and his right as the President were temporarily suspended and Goh Kun was playing his role as an acting President.

from which the Spanish troops had withdrawn in late June. The Ministry of National Defense said that if Korean forces went to Najaf, the holy city of the Shia, the troop departure would take place in late June but if the contingent had to go to the northern region, departure would be a month earlier (*JoongAng Daily* 3/22/2004).

Seoul needed to delay the dispatch since President Roh was under suspension of his right as the President due to the impeachment bill passed at the National Assembly and no one in the government wanted to facilitate the process while the President was waiting for the Constitutional court's decision.

In the meantime, the US announced that it would deploy its 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division stationed in Korea to Iraq. It stirred speculation that Washington made the move in part out of the irritation that Seoul had delayed a deployment of 3,000-strong additional troops to Iraq. It was a great shock to Koreans since many Korean officials had, with confidence, denied any possibility of the transfer of US forces in Korea to Iraq whenever the press tiptoed around the question. Even Korean Ambassador to the US Han Sung Joo said that "Secretary Rumsfeld does not mean that the US forces in Korea were needed in Iraq" (*Dong A-Ilbo* 11/16/2003). Once the US made a decision to transfer a brigade, the Korean government stepped up its efforts to deploy its troops. Despite a Korean citizen's tragic death incurred by the terrorist group in Baghdad on June 21, 2004, the Korean government, with the support of the ruling Uri Party, sent the first troop in July 2004 and the main contingent group in August to central Irbil and the nearby area of Ninawa in northern Iraq.

6. CONCLUSION: MISSED OPPORTUNITY AND LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

President Roh said in his speech before the National Assembly, "I decided to dispatch troops, despite ongoing anti-war protests, because of the fate of our country and the people" (*New York Times* 4/3/2003). "In order to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue peacefully, it is important to maintain strong cooperation with the United States" (*New York Times* 4/3/2003). President Roh was seeking to maximize Seoul's influence on Washington in any moves the United States makes toward North Korea once the Iraq war has ended.

Some give President Roh credit for his decision to push for troop deployment despite his own anti-war position and the strong public opposition to the war as part of a shrewd but risky bid to preserve the alliance with the United States.

Unfortunately, however, the US-South Korean alliance has not shown any improvement despite Seoul's dispatch of an additional 3,000 soldiers to Iraq. President Bush in his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in New York, expressed his appreciation by mentioning eight countries and their respective leaders who courageously assisted the United States stabilization efforts. South Korea and President Roh were not mentioned at all. If this was a reflection of the mood within the Bush administration about the way Korea dealt with the issue of troop dispatch, Korea's dispatch policy does not appear to be a successful one.

Citizen's Action against Deployment to Iraq, a coalition group of 351 NGOs, proclaimed that they would work to deter any attempt to prolong the stay of the Korean troops in Iraq. Korean troops had originally planned to stay in Iraq until December 2004 as stated in the bill passed in February 2004. Ironically, the "Citizen's Action" did not challenge the Roh government's decision to renew the duration of the Korean forces in Iraq for another year

despite its rhetoric which opposed precisely this. This was rather surprising considering the fact that a significant number of the Korean people still opposed the troop dispatch.

At least two reasons can be assessed. First, it was a difficult challenge for the NGO leaders to push President Roh when the ROK troops in Irbil were not engaged in dangerous combat activities. They worried that too much pressure against President Roh might backfire and arouse angry reactions from the conservatives both at home and abroad. Second, a series of softened-US approaches including Secretary Rumsfeld's visit to Korean forces' Headquarters in Iraq, successful completion of FOTA meetings, and President Bush's support on President Roh's initiative on peaceful resolution of the nuclear standoff were regarded by the NGOs as a moral victory. Therefore, they did not intend to make an issue out of renewing the bill.

The role played by the "Citizens Action against Deployment to Iraq" in the decision-making process is unprecedented in the history of Korean foreign policy. As Korean society becomes more democratized and pluralized, security issues can easily become targets for heated debate, and the example of the US request of troop dispatch to Iraq clearly shows that South Korea's progressive NGO leaders maintain their political upper hand. The problem is that their tendency to attack the US position endangers the viable strategic alliance relationship that has survived for more than 50 years. They regard the Bush administration's hard-line policy toward North Korea as typical of US imperialism and obstructionism. For them, the Bush administration was the greater obstacle to inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification on the Korean peninsula. The NGO leaders are now focusing on Pyongtaek issue to organize protest against the transfer of US forces to a new post south of the Han River. As we have seen in this study, it can be expected with certainty that they will use a variety of methods to influence the members of the National Assembly, and disseminate their excessively nationalistic views through the media and the Internet to mobilize young supporters to their cause.

The Korean NGOs are powerful as long as they are fully funded and supported by their sympathizers. However, this study also suggests that their extreme leftist nationalism as well as uncompromisingly sympathetic stance toward North Korea has irritated many citizens. An indication of this is that people began expressing their concerns about the NGOs' methods to influence the policy-making process. To prevent further damage to the US-ROK alliance, policymakers of the two countries and all others concerned should understand the changing nature of Korean politics and find ways to protect the long-term strategic and economic interests from falling victim to an ideologically-driven radical NGO coalition.

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