

What Happened Sixty Years Ago?: ROK-US Deep Distrust between President Rhee and Eisenhower

Tae Gyun Park

Many letters were sent between President Rhee Syng-Man and President Dwight Eisenhower before and after the release of anti-communist POWs which was unilaterally ordered by Rhee. According to these letters, President Rhee intended to use the release as a means to disturb the armistice and Ike was furious to the point of devising another plan to replace leadership in South Korea. According to the letters, the conflict between the two leaders was much more serious than it had been already assessed by scholars.

Furthermore, Rhee's "March North for Unification" was another controversial issue after the armistice. It was closely related to the political conference which was a critical provision of the Armistice Agreement. The conference was to be held three months after the armistice was signed. Rhee refused to attend the conference and wished to implement his policy in case the conference failed, whereas the US government strongly opposed any military reaction against the communists. The controversy continued until the end of the Rhee administration.

What caused these serious conflicts at the critical moment between two countries that in the end signed a mutual security pact? According to the letters, the cause mainly stemmed from Rhee's hawkish policy which rejected any peaceful solution of the Korean problem. However, this is a reflection of Rhee's disappointment not only at the change in the war policy of the UN and the US, but also at the vague comments by President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles about Rhee's request.

Keywords: *Syng Man Rhee, Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, Richard Nixon, Korean War, Release of Anti-Communist Prisoners of War, Armistice Agreement*

1. INTRODUCTION

2013 is the sixtieth anniversary of the Armistice Agreement, which was signed after the end of hostilities in the Korean peninsula. During the sixty years following 1953, the security system of the Korean peninsula was managed under the Armistice System established by the Armistice Agreement. Many scholars have pointed out that the signing of the Armistice Agreement did not mean that the war ended, as thousands of clashes and skirmishes still occurred under the system (Criebel, 1972, 96-99; Lerner, 2002; Myung Rim Park, 1996; Tae Gyun Park, 2006). Although the DPRK government has tried to argue that the agreement is null and void since 1994, all other parties in the Armistice System—South Korea, the United States, and China—recognize that it is still in operation until the “final peaceful settlement is achieved” based on the protocol in the preamble of the Armistice Agreement.¹

In this sense, there remains a question: why has North Korea maintained that the

¹ Agreement between the Commander-in-Chief, United Nations Command, and the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army and the Commander of the Chinese People's Volunteers, Concerning a Military Armistice in Korea. Signed at Panmunjom, Korea, July 27, 1953. *International Organization*, vol. 7, No. 4, Nov. pp. 612-634

Armistice Agreement no longer functions since 1993? The general answer can be easily imagined from two perspectives. On one hand, North Korea wants to have direct talks with the US without the participation of South Korea; on the other hand, this bilateral talk will have the effect of isolating South Korea. The legitimacy for this action is provided by the fact that the South Korean government did not sign the agreement in 1953, even though operational control over the South Korean forces was under the United Nations Forces command.²

It is clear that both the South Korean president and the UN Forces commander did not sign in 1953. President Syngman Rhee did not agree to end the hostilities and insisted on the continuation of the war against both North Korean and Chinese forces despite the US government's attempt to persuade him to sign the agreement. Why didn't he? What was his motivation for rejection even when it was highly likely that South Korea would be unable to defend itself without American assistance during and after the war? Did President Rhee really want to reach the Yalu River and oust all communists from the Korean peninsula against President Eisenhower's strong opposition? If so, was his plan realistic?

No scholar is yet to provide clear answers to these questions. Not only because of the lack of raw data, but also because it can be easily guessed that Rhee's plan was just rhetoric to acquire security guarantee from the US at the time. Accordingly, the release of anti-communist prisoners of war on Rhee's order in 1953 is interpreted as a successful brinkmanship strategy to engage the US government to sign the Mutual Defense Treaty with South Korea at that time (Il Young Kim, 2004, 103-105)³.

I would like to reexamine this argument by assessing the letters exchanged between Rhee and Ike in 1953 and 1954, which have been recently declassified by the Presidential Archive in South Korea.⁴ During this time, Rhee and Secretary of State John F. Dulles exchanged numerous letters with each other as well, which are also examined in this paper. These letters allow a much deeper analysis of the characteristics and the reality of the event.

1.1 Different Prerequisite for the Armistice

In Rhee's letter to Ike on April 9, 1953, he expressed his intention to continue to march north until unification was reached, regardless of the US force's support. In a very strong tone, he wrote, "The United States forces should decide to withdraw entirely from Korea, ... if the US did not want to provide coverage with planes, long-range artillery and naval vessels." (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 33)

This was a bombshell to Ike who had urged North Korean and Chinese communist forces to agree with the cease-fire of the war, which was also one of the crucial commitments made by Ike during the 1952 presidential campaign. The visit to Korea as the President-elect between December 2 and 5, 1952 demonstrated the urgency of the cease-fire in the new administration, which was inaugurated in early 1953.⁵ A truce at the front-line was the

² Han, Eungho, "Chǒngjǒn hyǒpjǒng wibanja ūi hwangdanghan kwebyǒn" [Absurd rhetoric by violators of the Armistice Agreement], *Rodong sinmun*, April 6, 1991.

³ Although Rosemary Foot paid attention to the US policy toward the Armistice negotiation and agreement, she did not focus on the circumstances Rhee was in. (Foot, 1990)

⁴ The letters were transferred from the Kyǒngmudae, where the South Korean president lived in 1950s, to the archive.

⁵ "Sasangch'oyuūi Kwibin" [The Unprecedented VIP], December 7, 1953. *Dong-A Daily*.

foremost priority for the US government at the time, to the point where Ike seriously considered intimidating the communists with an atomic bomb in order to reach a compromise. What struck the American government by surprise was that the South Korean government, an ally that had barely maintained sovereignty by the US-led UN Force's assistance after North Korea's invasion, did not abide by Ike's policy.

The letter sent by the American president on April 23 shows his severe grief. In his most courteous words, Ike wrote, "I would be lacking in candor if I did not state that I was deeply disturbed at the implication of your letter of April 9, not only for Korea but for the efforts being made to deal with the problem of Communist aggression by the collective action of free peoples." He added that his effort to stop the hostility within the Korean peninsula might be entirely compromised "if your Government should take actions which could not be supported by this or other governments supporting the defense of your country." Then he warned as below;

You recognize that any such action by your government could only result in disaster for your country, obliterating all that has been gained at such sacrifices by our peoples. I am confident that if a spirit of mutual respect, trust and confidence as essential to the accomplishment of the high task upon which our countries are engaged can be maintained, we shall be successful. However, if unhappily the objective of a true peace proves to be unattainable, sober consideration will then have to be given as to what should be done under those circumstances.

The last sentence of this letter, "sober consideration will then have to be given as to what should be done under those circumstances," deserves particular attention. This signifies the gravity of Rhee's statement and Ike's response. Although he did not directly mention it, his words implied that Rhee's plan could seriously undermine Ike's effort to end the hostilities. Eisenhower may have regarded Rhee's plan as a direct challenge to the US (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 38-39).

Rhee seems to have been perplexed by Ike's letter. Although he reiterated his position against the armistice, he had begun to suggest conditions to accept the US policy for the cease-fire in his letter on May 30, 1953. First of all, he wrote that it is absolutely intolerable to allow "the Chinese Communists to remain in Korea," as it would entail "an acceptance of a death sentence without protest" for South Korea. He used the word "stalemate" in his letter to describe South Korea's situation because the Chinese Voluntary Army (CVA) was involved in the Korean War.

Secondly, the more important condition he proposed was the agreement of a mutual defense pact between Korea and the US before the armistice is working. He added it would be more appropriate if the pact is signed on the condition that both the Communist and the US forces withdraw from Korea simultaneously. This opened the possibility that the US forces may leave Korea if the unilateral military action to North Korea was supported by the mutual defense pact.

However, the pact should cover the following points according to Rhee:

The United States will agree to come to our military aid and assistance immediately without any consultation or conference with any nation or nations, if and when an enemy nation or nations resume aggressive activities against the Korean peninsula. Adequate supplies of arms, ammunition and general logistic materials will be given to Korea with a view to making it

strong enough to defend itself without needing American soldiers to fight in Korea again. The United States air and naval forces will remain where they are now so as to deter the enemy from attempting another aggression. (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 46-48)

Rhee's desire to sign this pact was so strong that he wanted to sign it even before the armistice was concluded.

In fact, the points Rhee suggested above have a very important meaning in modern Korean history. Not only Rhee, but other South Korean presidents, in particular Park Chônghee, also wanted the US to guarantee their immediate or automatic involvement without any consultation or conference, if and when an enemy nation resumes aggressive activities against South Korea. That was one of the foremost conditions that Park requested the Johnson administration when he decided to send Korean combat troops to Vietnam (Tae Gyun Park, 2013: 270-317).

And the last point, "The United States air and naval forces will remain where they are now so as to deter the enemy from attempting another aggression," deserves attention as well. At the beginning of the letter, it sounded as though Rhee accepted the US forces' concurrent withdrawal with the CVA. However, this point suggests otherwise: while stressing "the right of self-determination" at the end of the letter, the last point emphasizes the need for the US force presence in South Korea.

From Ike's point of view, Rhee's proposal was acceptable since he had already considered forming a security pact with South Korea, similar to the ones already concluded with Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. In his letter dated June 6, 1953, 12 days before the release of the anti-communist POWs, he was willing to sign the treaty at the extension of Rhee's agreement on the armistice agreement.⁶ Ike even mentioned the possible creation of a "collective security system," although the US government had been reluctant to establish one in the Pacific area that differed from NATO in Europe and SEATO in Southeast Asia. Rhee had earnestly called for the collective security system since his inauguration in 1948.⁷

However, he expressed the difficulty in accepting the conditions Rhee suggested. First of all, Ike wrote, "[o]f course you realize that under our constitutional system any such treaty would be made only with the advice and consent of the Senate," which meant that Rhee's first prerequisite condition, "without any consultation or conference with any nation or nations," could not be fulfilled. Furthermore, simultaneous withdrawal of all foreign troops from the Korean peninsula was simply impossible from Ike's perspective (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 54-57).

In the end, the letter from Ike on June 6, 1953 shows that he did not accept most of the main conditions that President Rhee proposed as prerequisites for a mutual defense pact through correspondence. A week later on June 13, President Ike invited President Rhee to Washington D.C. to consult the issue confidentially through a letter sent by the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles (The Presidential Archives, 2012, 176-178).

The letters between early 1953 and the period shortly before the release demonstrate that

⁶ In the letter of June 6, 1953, there is a mistyping, "investment [investment]." And another error is also found; "and intentions notto [and intentions not to]."

⁷ Since the beginning of the Republic of Korea (ROK) government in 1948, President Rhee expressed his willingness to organize a collective security pact in the Asia-Pacific region. According to him, South Korea should initiate the pact along with Taiwan, both of which were located in front-lines of the Cold War system (Choe, 1999; J. Park, 2006; T. Park, 2009).

neither of them made any concessions and realized that a compromise through peaceful means, such as a cease-fire, would not be possible, at least from Rhee's side.

1.2 A Temporary Remedy

On June 17, 1953, one day before the release of anti-communist POWs, Rhee sent a letter which seemed to be a declaration of provocation. In the first part of the letter, he expresses the despair of inevitable recognition that he could not change the imminent situation. The UN is willing to "conclude a ceasefire agreement with the communist aggressors, regardless of what may happen to Korea in practical terms," which caused South Koreans to be "constantly haunted by the question of how we can survive as a nation at all." He follows with complaints about the changes in the United States' war strategy since 1950.

In the first year of this three-year war, both the United States and the United Nations alternately and repeatedly announced as their war objectives, the establishment of a united, independent and democratic Korea and the punishment of the aggressors. These announcements were proclaimed at the time of the United Nations' drive to the Yalu, thus were considered by South Koreans as declared war objectives. But later when the communist forces proved to be stronger than expected, the United Nations forces leaders argued that it had never intended to unify Korea through war. That was an open confession of weakness; very few people took it at its face value. There is no longer the talk about "the unification of Korea" or "punishment of the communist aggressors," as if these objectives are already achieved or abandoned them entirely. All we hear about is the armistice. I have a deep suspicion whether an armistice reached in such an atmosphere of appeasement can lead to a permanent peace that is acceptable and honorable. Personally I do not believe that the communists will agree to, at a conference table, what they have never agreed on the battle field.

Rhee then asserted that he was willing to refuse the US assistance "as a price for our acceptance of the armistice," because the armistice would be a "fatal blow" to South Korea. According to him, even the effect of the mutual defense pact would be questionable and "diminished almost to a vanishing point." He interpreted the truce talk between the UN and communists as "joining hands, it seems, with the enemy."

In the last paragraph of the letter, he brought up three questions: "What is to follow for the rest of Far East? And the rest of Asia? And the rest of the Free World?" Rhee ended his letter to Ike with these words: "Still looking to your wise leadership for a remedy in this perilous hour." The last words imply that Eisenhower is expected to replace his mistaken policy to a wise one by initiating an action (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 62-63).

A day after sending the letter to Ike, Rhee suddenly ordered the South Korean military police to release the anti-communist POWs from POW camps on June 18, 1953, without any notice to the UN forces command who held the operational control over the entire South Korean forces. The date, June 18, 1953, was the day when three parties, North Korean Forces, the CVA and the UN forces command planned to sign the Armistice Agreement. It was clear that Rhee's decision fell on that day in order to interrupt its conclusion, as he knew the communists would not sign the agreement upon UN forces' violation of the concord. The concord between them was that Indian forces as a neutral power would manage all of anti-communist POWs who refused to return, soon after the signing of armistice agreement in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) (Stairs, 1970: 302-320).

Ike was furious at the release ordered by Rhee. He strongly criticized Rhee's action in the letter dated in June 19, 1953, one day after the release.⁸ Eisenhower denounced the release ordered by Rhee as an “open violence” by “South Korean elements against the authority of the United Nations Command,” because the POWs camp was “under the authority of the United Nations command.”⁹ Furthermore, he discussed President Rhee’s letter on July 15, 1950 as below:

On July 15, 1950, you formally advised the Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations Command that in view of the joint military effort of the United Nations on behalf of the Republic of Korea you assigned to him and to such military commanders as may exercise United Nations Command authority within Korea or in adjacent seas “authority over all land, sea and air forces of the Republic of Korea during the period of the present state of hostilities.” I am informed by General Clark and assurance that you would take no unilateral action at variance with the forging without prior consultation with them.

Your present order and action there under constitutes a clear violation of this assurance and creates an impossible situation for the United Nations Command. If continued, such a course of action can only result in the needless sacrifice of all that has been won for Korea by the blood and bravery of its magnificent fighting forces. Persistence in your present course of action will make impractical for the United Nations Command to continue to operate jointly with you under the conditions which would result there from.

Ike then stressed that “another arrangement” would be necessary, “[u]nless you are prepared immediately and unequivocally to accept the authority of the United Nations Command.”¹⁰ He added that the UN Commander-in-Chief has now been authorized to take such steps if it may become necessary, although there is no mention of what “such steps” were (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 66-67).

“Another arrangement” and “such steps” in the letter may refer to rendering Rhee powerless and incompetent or forcing him not to obstruct President Ike’s plan for the armistice. Another hypothetical plan would be the removal of UN forces from the Korean peninsula, but this was not strategically viable because it would denote the failure of US policies since 1945 as well as during last three years. In fact, as it has been well researched in the academia, this “Ever-ready Plan” to depose Rhee from presidency may have been one of

⁸ Not only President Ike, but Secretary of State Dulles also seemed to express his despair to President Rhee by a letter. Although his letter is not found in the files of President Rhee’s letters, it is not difficult to imagine the contents through a letter sent from President Rhee to the secretary dated on July 11, 1953. In the letter, President Rhee wrote that he was so frustrated by a letter from Secretary Dulles. The paragraph of the letter is as below; “As I reread your letter, and I assure you it has had my most earnest and prayerful attention, its text seems to indicate that I am a heartless wretch without gratitude and without any regard for any human values except perhaps the narrow self-interest of our own people. I cannot think that this is a true representation of your feelings. It is true, of course, that we have asked and asked, and that we have received and received.” (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 176-178)

⁹ This was reported in *Dong-A Daily* on June 20, 1953, entitled, “Aekukporo Sökbang Banhyang [The Reaction of the release of the Patriotic POWs],” However, this was not yet cited by any scholars.

¹⁰ In addition, he was willing to declare that designated mutual security agreement proposed by his letter of June 6, 1953 must not become applicable.

such schemes (Hong, 1994; T. Park, 2012: 117-122).¹¹ Instead, Ike chose to send a special envoy, Assistant Secretary of State Robertson, to coerce Rhee to return operational control over South Korean forces to the UN forces command. He arrived in Seoul on June 25, 1953, a week after the release.¹²

Eisenhower was satisfied with the result of the negotiation between Rhee and Robertson. He remarked, “Mr. Robertson’s reports encourage me to believe that we can continue to go forward side by side,” and “I hope many misunderstandings have brought about an intimacy of understanding and purpose between us which has been too long deferred,” in his letter dated in July 8, 1953. He added that he was “profoundly sympathetic” to President Rhee and appreciated his concession: “Your illustrious place in history as a great patriot is due to patient and sober striving.” (The Presidential Archives, 2012, 69-70) According to this letter, all the conflicts between the US and the South Korean government have been resolved.

However, the reality was different from Washington’s expectations. In a correspondence sent to Ike on July 11, 1953, Rhee reiterated his wish for a political settlement in exchange for the unification through armistice, in spite of his decision not to obstruct it “in any manner, the implementation of the terms, in deference to your requests.” In other words, he had agreed with Ike’s envoy just to show “an evidence of friendship.” He further cautioned that although he wishes the successful execution of Ike’s plan, communists will never dare to advance and that “the world will be pushed over the brink of general war.” (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 73-74.)

Rhee then intimated that through his plan of crossing over the demarcation line, “Marching North for Unification (*pukjint’ongil*),” would be consistent with the Eisenhower administration’s future plans “following the expected failure of the political conference” as designated in the Armistice Agreement. His argument was included in the letter to Secretary Dulles, sent on the same day as the aforementioned letter to Ike. Although he inevitably accepted what was asked by the US, he expressed to Secretary Dulles that he acceded despite his dissent with the objective. Rhee further pressed Dulles that should the armistice result in failure, the Eisenhower administration must let him do whatever he wants (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 183-188).

His remarks to both Ike and Dulles are consistent with his public announcement in the press conference held soon after the meeting with Assistant Secretary Robertson. He argued publicly that the position of a representative in the UN forces at the truce talk was very different from the mutual consent between him and Robertson, and he was not yet informed about what the Eisenhower administration guaranteed at the expense of his concession. Rhee also claimed that he did not receive any feedback on the clauses he wished to be included in the mutual defense pact, although Ike had already expressed his rejection of Rhee’s suggestions in the letter dated on June 6, 1953, as previously discussed here. His speech in public was very different from that in his letters to Ike. As if doing a favor, he ended his speech with a comment that he truly hopes to refrain from conducting unilateral policies such

¹¹ According to Hong and T. Park, the plan was already designed during the 1952 political turmoil which was a little different from that in 1953. However, it was not implemented in 1952 because the American government successfully reached a compromise between President Rhee and the opposition party back then.

¹² “Han’gukunmyōngūi Chungdaegiro [Crucial Crossroad of Korea’s Destiny],” June 27, 1953. *Kyunghyang Daily*.

as the release.¹³

Through an analysis of the letters between Ike and Rhee before and after the release of anti-communist POWs, it can be inferred that the conflict caused by Rhee's unilateral action were only superficially remedied through letters between them and Robertson's visit to Korea. Their interpretation of the compromise was very different; Ike believed that Rhee completely accepted his position and promised not to commit unilateral actions anymore, while Rhee seemed to feel that American government did not clearly express what they would do for him to agree on the armistice. The key point was also different; for Rhee, it was about whether continuous military action for unification is possible if the political conference had failed, whereas Ike paid more attention to Rhee's concession due to a mutual defense pact between the US and South Korea. They were two strange bedfellows: the conflict between them was not resolved, but had only been remedied temporarily.

1.3 What did Rhee Get?

The Armistice was signed on July 27, 1953 and brought an end to the three-year hostilities. It had taken two years to reach an agreement between United Nations and the Communist forces. However, it did not only denote that all military clashes permanently stopped; the tensions between American and South Korean government were also not resolved. The former has been already examined by many scholars, while the same is not true for the latter case.

At the moment of signing, Ike may have been concerned more with the actions President Rhee would take than what would happen in Panmunjŏm. However, there had been another contention in late July shortly before the armistice. Rhee sent a letter on July 24, 1953 to Secretary Dulles and he stressed again the guarantees he wanted from the US in return for his agreement with the armistice. At the risk of being redundant with his letter dated on May 30 aforementioned, Rhee nonetheless clarified the proposed prerequisite conditions to Eisenhower again.

First, in the proposed mutual security pact, may we count upon inclusion of a provision for immediate and automatic military support in case the Republic of Korea should be attacked by an external enemy? As you know, a pact that is sufficient for a nation not in our position would not be adequate to our needs.

Second, when the political conference fails in ninety days, may we count upon the United States joining with us to resume the military efforts to drive the Chinese Red invaders from our land? If this joint effort to achieve our common objective is beyond your present ability to promise us, can we count upon the United States for moral and material support, in addition to general economic assistance, for our own military efforts to eject the invaders from Korea? (The Presidential Archives, 2012, 190-191)

This letter disconcerted Ike and Dulles. In particular, both of them were surprised that President Rhee did not understand what the American government communicated to him through letters since June 6 and meetings with Robertson after the release of the anti-communist POWs. Dulles immediately sent a letter the following day on behalf of President

¹³ “Hanmihyŏpyak hyujihwarŭl wuryŏ” [Anxiety about the Armistice Being made a scrap of paper], July 26, 1953. *Kyunghyang Daily*.

Ike. Dulles started with the below sentence:

I have your message of July 24. I have read it to President Eisenhower. We are both surprised at your statement that “before deciding on the position of my Government it is of utmost importance(sic) to have your answers to two vital questions which at present remain in an uncertain status.” Our surprise is twofold. We thought you had decided and we thought you had the answers. (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 194-195)

Dulles asserted that “only Congress can declare war” according to the US constitution and the fact that South Korea had a mutual defense pact should make them “feel confident that the treaty we propose will deter aggression.” He even invoked that possible military effort following a collapse of the political conference was “not a matter where the President can give any blanket commitment in advance.” Then he addressed the international criticism directed toward Rhee, which “ha[d] been slandering you and alleging that such promises as you have given the President and me could not be rejected these depended upon.” (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 194-195)

However, in Rhee’s letter in July 26, 1953,¹⁴ Rhee wrote that the question of whether the US would support his military reaction was “left for consideration in my talks with you.” This means that further consultation is needed between American and South Korean government as soon as possible following the failure of the political conference. He also stressed “immediate and automatic military reaction” by the US if South Korea was subjected to unprovoked attack.¹⁵ By using quotation marks, he intended to emphasize that the United States government stated those words to President Rhee, but they could not be found in any letters sent by neither President Ike nor Secretary Dulles before July 26, 1953 (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 198-199).

As this dispute was going on, President Rhee sent a letter to Ike on July 27, 1953, the day hostilities in the Korean peninsula stopped. Rhee wrote, “Your great generosity in rushing through (sic) this last week of the Congressional session an immediate appropriation of two hundred million dollars to speed our reconstruction is appreciated from the depths of our hearts.” He then defined, “one phase of our problem ends and another begins” with the signing of the truce. At the end of the letter, he added sarcastically, “[n]aver(sic) in all my life have I hoped so much that my own judgment should prove in the end to be wrong.” (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 76).

It deserves our attention that this letter replaced an earlier letter that was not sent to Ike. In the undelivered letter, Rhee’s had complained about the management of US assistance to South Korea. His dissatisfaction involved two points: first, all assistance including funds was completely controlled by the American Economic Coordinator; second, the assistance was used not for reconstructions and rehabilitation, but for immediate relief. He followed by warning President Ike as below:

I am (sic) sorry to inform you of the fact that our position is such that we cannot sign the agreement unless the two points are cleared. We told Mr. Wood that the Korean government

¹⁴ This letter started from the sentence, “Your letter of July 25 is both reassuring and a little bit disturbing.”

¹⁵ He pointed out that the external attack meant not only from communists but from Japanese in the letter.

will continue to make every effort to spend a large sum of its own money for the reconstruction work - If necessary I will make a record what we have been doing for national reconstruction without our side help anybody's knowing and we pledge to continue to do it in every way possible....

Out of our deep gratitude to your excellency and to your government and the people of the United States we would sign any agreement or contract relating to the disposition of the fund and I do confess that we did sign every agreement proposed by the representatives of the Am[erican] government without raising a question and without knowing the meaning of this and that but we have found out that such a way of signing of an international agreement without knowing what we are signing for led us to no end of trouble.

His complaint was about a new agreement, “Combined Economic Board (CEB) Agreement for a Program of Economic Reconstruction and Financial Stabilization between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America” signed on December 14, 1953.¹⁶ Did this new dispute over the American economic assistance mean a “new phase” (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 80-83) from the viewpoint of President Rhee? Rhee said that he could not sign the agreement unless the two points which he raised were cleared. This may be one of Rhee's strategies in regards to America's economic assistance. Although this letter was not delivered to the American government, it reveals that Rhee continued his policy to unify Korea by military means. In this sense, a new phase did not come yet, even though the Armistice Agreement was signed.

In the end, Rhee could not get anything from his brinkmanship strategy. What he wanted was to continue until all communists were kicked out of the peninsula, or to sign the mutual defense pact before the armistice if the Eisenhower administration did not change its policy for cease fire. However, neither was achieved at the time of the armistice. Instead, a sentiment of distrust began to develop between South Korean and American leaders.

This led Dulles to send a letter on August 7, 1953, 10 days after the armistice was signed. He sent a strong warning to President Rhee:

There are no other agreements or understandings, stated or implied, resulting from these consultations, other than these herein contained.

If either nation, for whatever reason should abrogate or violate any of the agreements included in this statement, the other will thereupon be freed from the obligations which it has undertaken to maintain these agreements.

He further stated that the South Korean government had agreed to postpone any unilateral action regarding expulsion of the CVA from Korea for the agreed duration of the political conference (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 203-205).

This letter is very significant since this letter was sent during his visit to Korea.¹⁷ He visited Korea on August 4, 1953, in order to consult about the Mutual Defense Treaty and

¹⁶ The agreement was also generally called as “Paek-Wood Agreement” because this agreement was signed between Paek Dujin, Prime Minister of South Korea and Tyler Wood, an American EC at that time.

¹⁷ “Töljangkwan ilhaeng chakyach’akhan” [The Group led by Secretary Dulles Arrived Korea Last Night], August 5, 1953. *Dong-A Daily*.

the US assistance, and had initial signature on the treaty before his departure. Why did Dulles send a letter while he was meeting Rhee in person? It can be assumed that Dulles wanted to produce a document about what he said to Rhee during the meeting. It may be because Dulles and Ike had already experienced communication problems with Rhee before and after the release of the anti-communist POWs, as it was mentioned above. Ike was embarrassed by Rhee's comments on his interpretation of Ike's letter and conversation with Robertson, so Ike asked Rhee to reread his letters again. Of course, President Rhee also suffered the same problem.

1.4 Unfinished Controversy

For the time being, President Rhee did not mention again about the Marching North policy. For example in a letter dated September 7, 1953, after Dulles returned, he pointed out another matter as below instead:¹⁸

Mr. Secretary, you may misunderstand me when I say anything that may appear as a criticism against the State Department. It is not aimed at the upper level authorities generally but the lower level pro-Japanese and pro-communist groups whose ideas are certainly in the last analysis anti-American (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 210-211).

Throughout his presidency, he frequently mentioned the negative role of pro-Japanese and pro-communist groups in the US government who were proponents of Japan-centered Asian policy (Tae Gyun Park, 2010).

Ike continued to pay close attention to Rhee's intentions following Dulles' visit. He sent a letter on November 4, 1953 which stressed the difficulty of obtaining ratification of the Mutual Defense Treaty in the Senate. In the letter, he argued that he could not assure the senators that the treaty would actually promote peace and mutual defense because Rhee "might unilaterally touch off a resumption of war in Korea." Eisenhower seriously cautioned, "[i]f you should decide to attack alone, I am convinced that you would expose the ROK forces to a disastrous defeat and they might well be permanently destroyed as an effective military force." (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 86-87)

Ike's tone in the letter was unprecedentedly very strong. It is quite difficult to imagine why he sent the letter employing a strong warning to Rhee, if only the letters between the two of them were examined. The latest letter before the November 4 letter was sent on September 7, 1953, from Rhee to Dulles. What happened during the two months?

Remembering the term of the political conference – "within 3 months"– in the Armistice Agreement is very useful in understanding why Ike sent such a letter with a strong tone. There were various activities in South Korea to urge resumption of attack against communists if the term for the political conference passed. When the first US assistance goods entered on August 29, 1953 in Busan, Rhee declared in a speech that South Korean forces would unilaterally march to North without UN assistance.¹⁹ In addition, Rhee stated

¹⁸ It was reported in Washington D.C. that there was no agreement without the treaty after his return. [Committing to writing of Eisenhower's Commitment, the Unknown of the Political Conference], August 11, 1953. *Dong-A Daily*.

¹⁹ "T'ongilwihan t'ujaengün pulp'ogi" [Never Give Up the Struggle for Unification], August 31, 1953. *Dong-A Daily*.

during an interview with the New York Times on September 30, 1953 that he would resume a war for independence and unification if the political conference could not achieve a successful result in ninety days.²⁰ In this interview, he changed the date South Korea would resume the war from three months after the armistice to ninety days after the opening of the conference.²¹ Even in his speech at the ceremony to celebrate the liberation day on August 15, 1953, he declared that he would not contribute anything for the success of the political conference.²²

After the Armistice Agreement, all the letters sent from Ike repeatedly emphasized the importance of the political conference in concluding “a final peaceful settlement.” He also robustly urged the South Korean government’s cooperation to the conference. However, Rhee’s reaction was always negative. The US pressured communist forces to agree with the political conference after the Armistice Agreement and the political conference was defined in the preamble of the agreement. The Eisenhower administration faced a dilemma because of its ally; the Rhee administration continued to refuse participation at the conference. All the letters exchanged between Rhee, Eisenhower, and Dulles argued over the effectiveness of the political conference. Ike may have been greatly distressed at Rhee’s negative reaction to the conference.

One of the reasons for the US Vice President Nixon’s visit to Korea on November 13, 1953 was to persuade Rhee to send delegates for the conference. Although Nixon was on a tight schedule during his world tour, his mission was very clear according to his conversation with President Rhee shortly before his departure at Kyōngmudae. Nixon stressed that he and Rhee agreed that “Korea and the US would keep pace together for establishing free, independent and unified Korea through the political conference.”²³

However, Rhee’s attitude was different from Nixon’s remarks in the press conference. In his letter on November 16, 1953, one day after Nixon’s departure, Rhee wrote as follows:

In reply to Mr. Nixon’s question but to me just before his leaving, I said that if everything should go contrary to our expectation and the worse comes to the worst, I would feel compelled to take a unilateral action, which I earnestly hope would never happen. I added, however, that I would inform you before making any such move.

Rhee added that he wanted Ike to keep their letters confidential because people could think that the US tried to bring pressure on him (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 90-91). In Ike’s reply in January 2, 1954, he gave a negative answer as a New Year’s gift that he did not accept his request (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 95).

²⁰ “Chōngch’ihoedam kyōlyōlsi pukjinppun” [Only One Solution is Marching North if the Political Conference is failed], September 30, 1953 *Dong-A Daily*.

²¹ South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pyōn Youngtae commented in a press conference that South Korean forces would not resume a war even after January 27, 1954, 6 months after the Armistice Agreement. (“Chūksi pukjin annūnda”[Will Not Resume the War Immediately], October, 31, 1953. *Dong-A Daily*.) His press conference was held on October 27, 1953, exactly 3 months after the agreement.

²² “Yidaetongryōng p’alilo kinyōmsa” [Celebrating Remark by President Rhee], August 17, 1953. *Dong-A Daily*

²³ “Niksūn mibutongryōng chakjoihan” [US Vice President Nixon Left Korea Yesterday Morning], November 16, 1953. *Dong-A Daily*.

In fact, in a memorandum dated on November 16, 1953, between Rhee and Nixon, Rhee's different position clearly surfaced. Nixon said that the US government must have assurance from the South Korean President not to take any unilateral action and Ike wanted a personal assurance from Rhee. Nixon gladly signed up to deliver Rhee's assurance to President Ike when he returned (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 90-91).

However, the policy of Marching North for Unification was clearly revived in a letter to Ike on March 11, 1954, 50 days before the political conference would be held in Geneva.

Under this circumstances(sic), I ask you to give your wholehearted support to our supreme effort to unify the north and the south and to drive the Chinese Communist troops from Korean soil. Our armed forces are eagerly awaiting the signal to push north, and are completely confident of victory. We ask from you only moral and material support. United Nations forces now in Korea need not actually participate in the battle, if they do not wish to do so. Koreans will take sole responsibility for the fighting. But we do need adequate arms, ammunition, and other logistics, and air and naval coverage from behind the frontlines. If you grant this request, we shall secretly arrange with General Hull a full program of implementation. When I was in Taipei, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek agreed to move his army to the mainland at the same time, and I know that he will do so. This information must, of course, be kept in strict confidence.

When Vice President Nixon was here, I promised him that I would take no unilateral action without first notifying you. I feel that the time now has come for me to give you such notification. ...

He also asked Ike to appoint General Van Fleet who was a commander of the 8th US Army during the Korean War as an advisor for training South Korean forces.

Eisenhower, expectedly, opposed Rhee's plan and expressed that if Rhee carried it out, Ike's orders "to both United States forces and to other United Nations forces would be to plan how best to prevent their becoming involved and to assure their security" in his letters on March 21 and April 16, 1954. Eisenhower still promised he would seriously consider strengthening the South Korean forces and sending General Van Fleet to Korea to persuade Rhee to dispatch the South Korean representative to the political conference. He pointed out that the conference was a provision South Korean government accepted and South Korea would be the only nation that refuses to attend the conference (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 102-104).

President Rhee was persuaded to send a representative to attend the political conference being held in Geneva in June due to America's commitment of military assistance. But at the same time, he had planned to declare that the armistice was automatically null and void and "there would be no more peace talks or negotiations regarding Korea," as soon as South Korea's Delegation to Geneva, Foreign Minister Pyön, returns from Geneva through his letter in June 24, 1954 (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 115-117).

Furthermore, his plan to Marching North for Unification seemed to gradually take shape in Rhee's letter to Dulles on July 1, 1954. The political conference had failed at the moment when he revealed his plan to Eisenhower.

In this connection, I have a definite plan to propose and explain confidentially to President Eisenhower and you. This plan will, I am sure, enable us to push up to the Yalu River with comparatively little sacrifices. This historic boundary line, if properly fortified, will be more

easily held against the enemy than any other line to the South. It is quite certain that this conclusive but limited action will not provoke a general war. (The Presidential Archives, 2012, pp. 251-252)

The letters that discussed the Marching North for Unification policy between Rhee and Ike end in July, perhaps because Rhee visited Washington D.C. in late July and signed the Minute Agreement in November 1954.²⁴ The Minute Agreement was more important to the Eisenhower administration than the Mutual Defense Treaty, since it included two critical contents: the article 2 of the agreement defined that South Korean forces are retained under the operational control of the UN command while the Command is responsible for the defense of the Republic of Korea; in articles 3 and 4, American government promised to provide the maintenance of an effective military program. There was another severe dispute between the governments during the discussion of the Minute Agreement, which almost induced the Eisenhower administration to revive the Ever-ready Plan in 1954 (Hong, 1994). Nonetheless, the agreement seemed to satisfy, to an extent, both presidents of South Korea and America.²⁵

Still, Rhee had not given up his unification policy after the Minute Agreement. For example, he had a plan to drive communists out from the three strategic areas, which was revealed in a letter to Senator Knowland dated on November 20, 1956. Rhee emphasized three areas located in south of the 38th parallel which the North occupied after the negotiations for the Armistice began: Kaesŏng, the Ongjin Peninsula, and the Han River Delta (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 359-360).

Due to Rhee's persistence with the plan, one of his old friends, Dr. Robert T. Oliver sent an undated letter to him in 1956 and urged him to suspend his policy.

As I conceive of present day sentiments, it would be better to say nothing of "marching north" (although being ready - "talking softly but carrying a big stick"). It does seem a good time for a whole series of statements beamed to north Korea the world about the "solidarity" of the entire Korean people. (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 362)

After the armistice, problems between South Korean and American government were only resolved superficially. Thus, the discord between the two continued to exist afterwards and the points of their disagreement were even reported in public. President Rhee did not sign the armistice in spite of his commitment to the Eisenhower administration that he would not hinder the process. Although he sent representative of South Korea to the political conference in 1954, he paid more attention to military strategy after the conference failed, instead of focusing on reaching a peaceful solution with allied countries under the UN flag.

²⁴ "Yidaetongryŏng chakil pangmidŭngjŏng" [President Rhee Left to America Yesterday], July 26, 1954. *Dong-A Daily*.

²⁵ From the viewpoint of American president, (1) 'South Korean government should cooperate with the US in its efforts to unify' in the article 1, (2) 'an effective military program consistent with economic stability and within available resources' in the article 3 and (3) South Korean government should 'continue to encourage private ownership of investment projects' in the article 4, were also what he wanted since his inauguration. From the perspective of the Rhee administration, the part of the article, "the US government should consult fully with appropriate military representatives of the ROK in the implementation of the program" seemed to satisfy Rhee.

And his policy, “Marching North for Unification,” continued until the late 1950s to the point that one of his closest friends recommended to suspend his plan. It was not terminated until he was forced out of the Kyōngmudae by civilians in 1960, regardless of Ike's commitment to provide huge amount of military and economic assistance. Such a conflict between South Korean and the US governments on policy toward North Korea were extended to subsequent administrations until Korea's democratization, even though the Park administration gave up “Marching North for Unification Policy.”

CONCLUSION

1953 was a year in which a high number of letters were exchanged between Rhee and Ike. In particular, many letters were sent between them before and after the release of anti-communist POWs unilaterally ordered by Rhee. According to the letters, the release was for President Rhee to disturb the armistice and Ike was furious to the point of preparing another plan to replace leadership in South Korea. The conflict was more serious than it had been already considered by scholars, because Ike directly informed Rhee about the plan in his letter. It was not persuasion, but intimidation.

Furthermore, Rhee's “March North for Unification” was another controversial issue after the armistice between South Korean and American governments. It was closely related to the political conference which was a critical provision of the Armistice Agreement. The conference was planned to be held in three months after the armistice was signed; however, there was no provision in the Armistice Agreement about what to do if the conference was failed. From the viewpoint of Rhee, he refused to attend the conference and wished to implement his policy if the conference was failed, whereas the US government strongly opposed any military reaction against the communists. The Eisenhower administration could not help providing massive military assistance to persuade Rhee to cooperate with the US policy, in spite of fact that such large-scale assistance was not consistent with the New Look Policy (Gaddis, 1982: 168-196). Rhee's plan did not seem to be just rhetoric because it was extremely detailed. The controversy continued until the end of the Rhee administration.

What caused these serious conflicts at the critical moment between two countries that signed a mutual security pact? According to the letters cited in this article, the cause mainly stemmed from Rhee's hawkish policy which rejected any peaceful solution of the Korean problem. He did not agree with any proposals from the Eisenhower administration pursuing honorable end of fighting. However, this is a reflection of Rhee's disappointment. He complained about the change in the war policy of the UN and the US, shocked at Ike's comment, “[n]either the United States nor the United Nations has ever committed itself to resort to war to achieve this objective” (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 38-39). Furthermore, the vague comments by Secretary Dulles deserve attention to understand Rhee's reaction. He delivered President Ike's message on July 25, 1953, that President Ike “does not wish to curtail the liberty of action to take whatever steps may be indicated by the conditions then existing” (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 195). He then wrote as below:

If, after the political conference has been in session for 90 days, it seems to us that the Communist delegates are not proceeding in good faith, and are using the conference primarily as a cover for political propaganda, then we shall be prepared to make a concurrent withdrawal from the conference. We will then consult further regarding the attainment of a unified, free

and independent Korea, which is the post war goal the United States set itself during World War II, which has been accepted by the United Nations as its goal, and which will continue to be an object of concern of United States foreign policy. (The Presidential Archives, 2012: 204)

Possibly, these comments by Secretary Dulles may have been misinterpreted by Rhee, even though the Eisenhower administration reiterated several times its strong opposition toward resumption of military actions against the communists. Since the primary objective of Ike and Secretary Dulles was to coerce Rhee to participate in both the armistice and the political conference, there is another possibility that they used inexplicit language both inevitably and intentionally. As a result, the conflict continued.

In that sense, to examine what happened sixty years ago is very useful to understand the problems between South Korean and American governments, as well as between South and North Korea under the Armistice System. The Armistice Agreement was continued because the political conference did not create “a final peaceful settlement.” The agreement does not have any provision about what to do if the conference fails.

Moreover, “Marching North for Unification” policy was extended to the next administration, especially in 1968, to which the US government tried to impede the policy by sending special envoys and using assistance, but they could not become a permanent solution. Only the maintenance of operational condition over the South Korean forces by the UN forces command (later the US forces command in South Korea) has been the sole means to check such attempts. If the documents produced in the 1970s and 1980s are declassified, there is another possibility that similar conflicts had been repeated even after democratization under the Armistice System. In other words, the critical complications that occurred sixty years ago are the origin of problems to this day.

More importantly, the conflicts in 1953 and 1954 developed a serious distrust between the two governments. When President Park Chŏng Hee declared Yusin in 1972, the American Ambassador in Seoul, Habib, felt frustrated and recalled experiences during the Rhee era. Along with the Marching North for Unification policy, the incident in 1953 provoked serious discord and doubt between South Korea and America.²⁶ The legacy of the tension between two allies in 1953 was greater than expected, even though the war is now becoming forgotten among the young generation.

Article Received: 05-01-2014 Revised: 05-28-2014 Accepted:06-11-2014

REFERENCES

- Agreement between the Commander-in-Chief, United Nations Command, and the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army and the Commander of the Chinese People's Volunteers, Concerning a Military Armistice in Korea. Signed at Panmunjom, Korea, July 27, 1953. *International Organization* 7(4): 612-634.
- Ch'oe, Yŏng Ho. 1999. “Yi Sŏngman chŏngbu ũi t'aepyŏngyangdongmang kusang kwa asiapangongyŏnmaeng kyŏlsŏng” [Syngman Rhee Administration's Plan for Pacific Alliance and Anti-Communist Asian Alliance]. *Kukjejŏngch'I nonch'ong* 39(2):

²⁶ Pol Kor S-US, Records of DOS relating to the internal affairs of Korea, May 26, 1972. 1970-1973, NARA.

165-182.

- Foot. 1990. *A Substitute for Victory*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. 1982. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press
- Gelézeau, Valérie. 2010. "Beyond the 'Long Partition.' From Divisive Geographies of Korea to the Korean 'Meta-Culture'," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9(1): 1-24.
- Hong, Suk-ryul. 1994. "Hanguk Chönchaeng Chikhu Mikuküi Yisüngman Chekökyehoek," *Yökbü* [Critical Review of History], 28: 138-169.
- Kim, Il-young. 2004. *Könguk kwa Puguk* [Establishment and Prosperity of a Country]. Seoul: Saengaküi namu.
- Kriebel, Wesley. 1972. "Korea: the Military Armistice Commission 1965-1970," *Military Affairs* 36(3):96-99.
- Lerner, Mitchell. 2002. *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas.
- Park, Chin Hüi. 2006. *Yi Sünngman üi taeilinsik kwa t'aepyöngyang chönjaeng* [Syngman Rhee's Perception of Japan and the Pacific War]. Seoul: Yökbü
- Park, Myung Rim. 2006. "Hanbando chögjön ch'eje: teungjang kujo, t'euksöng, p'yönhwan" [The Armistice System on the Korean Peninsula: Rise, Structure, Peculiarities, and Transformation]. *Han'guk kwa kukje chöngch'i* 22(1): 1-32.
- Park, Tae Gyun. 2010. "Panileul t'onghan ttodareun ilbon toegi" [Becoming Another Japan through Anti-Japanese Sentiment]. *Ilbon Pip'öng* 3: 98-119.
- _____. 2006. *Ubang kwa cheguk, hanmi kwangye üitu sinhwa* [Ally and Empire, Two Myths in the Korea-US relationship]. Seoul: Changbi
- _____. 2013. *An Ally and Empire*. Seoul: Academy of Korean Studies Press.
- The Presidential Library. 2012. *Yisüngman Daetongryöng Yöngmunsöhan PönyökjipI* [The Collective Volume I: Translation of Letters in Rhee Syng-Man Files]. Seoul: Presidential Library.
- Yi, Munhang. 2002. "MDL üi yönhyök kwa DMZ, haesangesöüi kinjang wanhwa reul wihan Nampuk kan silloe kuch'uk panghyang" [The history of MDL and DMZ: Directions for building trust through the reduction of tensions on the sea], in Kim, Jaehan et al. *DMZ 3: Chöpgyöngchiyök üi hwahae-hyömyöök*. Seoul: Sohwa