

# **State and Nation Building in South Korea: A Comparative Historical Perspective**

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The paper analyzes why South Korea, a war-torn and poverty-stricken country, succeeded in building a modern state in a single generation under the most trying circumstances. Despite its remarkable success, there are conflicting views on contemporary Korea: common liberal perspectives tend to focus on its deviances from democracy. The author develops a theoretical perspective on nation building which assumes that a new nation lacks the basic infrastructure of a modern state and therefore the primary task of leadership is to build this infrastructure—security, economy, and democracy. It is assumed that many constraints as well as multiple challenges exist in nation building, but a step-by-step approach is necessary. In terms of a comparative historical perspective based on the nation-building of early modernizers, those nations experienced a centralization of power, a buildup of a standing army and economic growth, and democratization occurred gradually. The paper then analyzes how South Korea's nation building is similar to those early modernizers in terms of sequential achievement in the order of security, economic growth, and democratization. Witnessing a looming failure of the U.S. policy of democracy promotion in Iraq, the approach has important theoretical implications for those who struggle with the lingering problems of many Third World nations.

Keywords: nation building, comparative historical perspective, Korean War, Syngman Rhee, South Korea

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South Korea is often referred to as a three miracle state—the miracles of security, economy, and democratization (Shultz 1992). The war-torn, poverty-stricken country succeeded in building a modern state in a single generation under the most trying circumstances, including a legacy of colonial rule, national division,

the Korean War, and continual confrontation with the Communist North. In terms of the difference between initial conditions and the end results, its success is extraordinary not only in the history of the country but also in comparison with other Third World countries. How did it survive despite a formidable Communist threat? How did it achieve an economic miracle without resources, capital, and technology? How did it democratize without a democratic tradition and under great threats to its security?

Despite Korea's remarkable success, there are conflicting views in contemporary Korean politics. The common liberal democratic perspectives (particularly those comparing Korea to the U.S.) tend to focus on deviances from democracy: as a result, the Korean governments of earlier decades are mostly criticized for their authoritarian rule. In terms of nation building, however, Korea is regarded as very successful. Unlike a one-dimensional approach based on democracy, a nation-building approach considers the challenges a nation faces, the priorities in national goals, government capacity, and the role of leadership.

This paper examines the literature on state and nation building, reviews the experiences of some successful cases of nation building, and evaluates Korea's nation building in terms of a comparative historical perspective. It will argue that the Korean government was initially too weak to meet the challenge of nation building but by consolidating its central power it was able to establish the foundation necessary for successful nation building.

## **A Comparative Historical Perspective of Nation Building**

### *Nature of Nation Building*

Nation building is a long-term process of building the social, economic, and political foundations of a modern state. State building is viewed as the initial phase of nation building. While the nation building in European countries preceded state building, in post-colonial states, state building preceded nation building. The two processes of state and nation building have generally reinforced each other (Hollingsworth 1971:5).

The nature of nation building is not well understood (Kim 2007a; Kim 2007b). Most social scientists tend to be ahistorical and apply Western perspectives to the study of developing nations without a proper consideration of the historical and social setting of the countries. In such studies, the countries have

generally been regarded as “normal” states—not much different from a Western democracy: socially stable, economically prosperous, and politically mature. But Gunnar Myrdal (1971) believes that social science “models” more or less appropriate to the Western experience should not be blindly applied to non-Western developmental situations.

In particular, studies on developing countries have been greatly influenced by American scholarship. As Huntington (1968:7) points out, American social science is inappropriate for analyzing the problems of developing nations for two reasons. First, American social science has been handicapped by the United States’s “happy history” in terms of economic plenty and abundant resources, social well-being, political stability, and limited internal and external threats. In addition, American social science has been blind to the problems of nation building in Third World countries because the United States had no historical experience with creating a political order. Huntington argues that the American political system is irrelevant as a model for developing nations; it is simply too weak, too diffuse, and too dispersed to mobilize the political power necessary to bring about fundamental change (Huntington 1975:59-61). In addition, “the ideal of peace” and the “unearned security” of America’s geographic position had for a long time diverted American attention from the issue of national security, resulting in a tendency to neglect security dilemmas in developing nations (Lippmann 1943:35-6).

Nation building is creating something that is lacking. As Machiavelli noted, “There is nothing more difficult to arrange, more doubtful of success, and more dangerous to carry through, than to initiate a new order of things” (quoted in Bull 1961:51). Even under the best of conditions, nation building is a difficult task. The colonial legacies of many Third World states make their nation building more challenging than was the case for Western states. These countries were often created arbitrarily and without the prerequisites for long-term internal and external security. Thus, post-colonial states were destined to pass through a period of turmoil, violence, and radical political experimentation on the road to social and political maturity (Buzan 1991:65-9).

In order to examine the issues of nation building, it is necessary to understand the challenges and problems the governments of Third World nations face. First of all, the most urgent challenge is insecurity—a high degree of internal and/or external threat (Azar and Moon 1988). The underlying causes of insecurity include a lack of unconditional legitimacy for state boundaries, state institutions, and regimes, inadequate societal cohesion, and the absence of consensus

on fundamental issues of the country, all of which are related to the process of state building and its corollary, nation building.

The second most common problem is poverty. Poverty is the source of various social problems such as disease, crime, social unrest, and illiteracy. Under these circumstances, a government cannot secure necessary human and physical resources and cannot solve national problems to a great extent. As a result, politics becomes unstable and national security is endangered. While national insecurity threatens national survival, poverty endangers individual well-being.

Third, the time required to successfully complete nation building differs fundamentally between the West and the Third World. The tasks of nation building, which in the West was accomplished over long stretches of time in an evolutionary manner, in the Third World must be completed in a revolutionary way within a few decades under more difficult circumstances. Whereas Western states had time to solve some of the worst problems of nation building before they had to face the ordeals of mass politics, nation building in developing nations has no such luxury (Rokkan 1975:598-9).

Fourth, nation building in developing countries generally takes place under considerable external pressure. The institutions, standards, and ideas of advanced countries are imposed and/or accepted in these countries. In addition, these states are under the influence of advanced states due to increased interdependence and rapidly changing technologies. Under these circumstances, the question of how to adjust to the external environment is crucial for developing nations. Like any living organism, a state emerges, survives, prospers or collapses within its environment. Thus, such factors as diplomacy, security, war, and alliance are important (Kothari 1976:11).

Finally, during the early stage of nation building, expectations and demands are high while state capacity is low. As the old order has been abolished and a new system is in the process of being formed, the core problem is a crisis of identity and legitimacy. Where tradition and rational legality both give way, charismatic leadership arises. The wish to solve crises or problems facing the people contributes to the desire for a savior—a charismatic leader who would end the crises. Charismatic leadership is thus a form of crisis leadership which pursues a strong and centralized power (Rustow 1970:208-47).

Students of the Third World tend to posit the centrality of state building in the political life of their own states. In state building, three primary functions are emphasized: to protect people and property (law and order and national defense), to establish government institutions and formulate policy (policy

capacity), and to extract resources to support governmental activities and provide public services (taxation or extraction) (Kothari 1976). Raju Thomas (1996) considers military security, economic development, and political democracy as the three essential pillars of a modern state. Thus, the author suggests that the primary task of nation building is to build the basic infrastructure of a modern nation, which includes:

- \* *national security* (internal and external security)
- \* *economic welfare* (economic development and public services such as education)
- \* *political development* (individual rights and political capacity)

Since most developing nations are overloaded by many extraordinary problems and challenges, an ordinary approach is usually inappropriate. Thus, a sequential solution to the tasks of nation building must be considered in a viable nation-building strategy (Rotberg 2003:3). In their study of the challenges faced by Japan and Turkey in achieving nation building, Ward and Rustow (1964:465-6) suggest that the two nations faced four sequential crises: a crisis of national identity, the critical need for self-defense against external enemies, the need for economic development, and, finally, the need for political development. Thus, in transitional societies priority setting is much more important than it is in Western democracies.

Nothing else can be considered more critical to a state than the provision of national security. Security is a necessary condition for state building. Without the assurance of national security, the pursuit of other nation-building goals, such as economic growth and democratization, is difficult, if not impossible. Not surprisingly, political leaders of newly independent states are preoccupied, even obsessed, by the survival of their states, and security considerations commonly dominate their domestic and foreign policies, often to the sacrifice of economic and democratizing issues (Ayooob 1995:191).

Security and democracy invoke different and incompatible values. The term democracy puts the individual at the center of everything. In contrast, security is a state-centered concept: it puts the state center stage, evoking grim images of hierarchy, regimentation, mobilization, and law and order. Democracy is inherently conflict-ridden and not conducive to political order, at least not until the state is able to deal with some serious challenges. Therefore, whether a state can find an ideal balance between the preservation of democratic principles and the assurance of public order and security is one of the most important political questions.

In particular, significant internal and external threats create tensions between democracy and security. Avner Yaniv (1993:1-2) suggests four types of relations between democracy and national security—1) a robust democracy in a well-defined state of war; 2) a fragile democracy in a well-defined state of war; 3) a robust democracy in protracted conflict; and 4) an insecure democracy in protracted conflict. In the first case, the country is likely to return to democratic processes after the war. In the second case, there is a high possibility of an authoritarian government emerging. In the third case, there will be a tough struggle between pro-democracy and security-first elements. In the last case (e.g., Israel, former South Vietnam, and South Korea), the likelihood of democracy surviving is low. Many Third World countries belong to the fourth type.

Once a nation's security is assured, that nation then needs to develop an economy strong enough to provide for the basic needs of its people. Economic security in a Third World state is often a life-or-death matter: economic growth and capital accumulation are more important than issues of social equality and distributive justice, which are major concerns of democratization. As Benjamin and Duvall (1985:39-40) point out, in developing nations "social inequality is a necessary and hence acceptable byproduct of development: turmoil with respect to social inequality is a fully unacceptable threat to social order, to be met with the full force of the state." A study of ninety-eight countries came to the conclusion that "among the poor nations, an authoritarian political system increases the rate of economic development, while a democratic political system does appear to be a luxury which hinders development" (Marsh 1979:244). As Raju Thomas (1996:5) puts it, "The right to vote does not necessarily guarantee people the right to food, shelter, and the basic necessities of life."

Political development is the third requirement of a modern nation. Implanting democratic institutions in developing countries is no easy task, and even when such institutions are established it is difficult to sustain them. Undoubtedly, security pressure is not the only force that prevents democracy from taking root. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of self-government experience, and the tradition of authoritarian rule can all contribute to the difficulties of establishing and sustaining democracies. Democracy presupposes the presence of minimal economic autonomy to exercise political rights: the higher the socioeconomic level of a country, the greater the chance that it will be able to sustain a democracy (Lipset 1959:75).

Existing scholarship on developing nations tends to insist on democratization

before the rest of the state apparatus is in place. However, it appears equally necessary to build a state before beginning the process of democratization. It is wrong to view democratization as a component of the process of state building, because the democratization effort assumes that functioning state apparatuses are already in place (ISD Report 2003:7). Democracy in the initial stages of state building may in fact have a destabilizing effect; the introduction of a democratic system will either decrease state capacity or generate demands for new types of state capabilities that are weak or even nonexistent (Fukuyama 2004:15). As James Madison pointed out, “you must first enable the government to control the governed, and in the next place it to control itself” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961). In most developing nations, governments have been unable to perform the first function, much less the second. In fact, a weak, incompetent, or nonexistent government is the source of social and political crisis in developing nations (Midgal 1988).

Post-colonial or new states had to tackle nation building within a few decades under difficult circumstances. Because the governments of these countries have been overburdened and over-pressured, the probability of their success has been low; only a few states have succeeded in nation building while many others have failed, even collapsed (Rotberg 2003). Thus, in order to tackle the difficult tasks of nation building, developing nations require a strong government and political stability sufficient to permit the concentration of resources, time, and energy (Ward and Rustow 1964:465-6). In other words, the primary need that these states face is the accumulation and concentration of power, not its dispersion.

### *Comparative Historical Perspective*

The process of nation building can hardly be analyzed without considering in a comparative way contemporary as well as historical phenomena. A social scientist who takes a historical approach or a historian who employs a social science framework will have entirely different approaches from those historians and social scientists that adopt an ahistorical approach. The goal of the social scientist and historian is to specify the circumstances under which certain kinds of events occur (Hollingsworth 1971:253-4). Thus, the politics of nation building is comparative historical politics. It is meaningful to note that a group of Southeast Asian historians have endeavored to write the nation-building histories of their countries (Wang 2005).

The difficulties in nation building have not been limited to Third World states. Although nation building in European states was easier because it took place gradually over an extended period of time without serious external pressure, their experiences were much more violent and top-down than is commonly acknowledged (Tilly 1975). The nation building in most European states occurred through a centralized power such as an absolute monarchy, because a strong power was necessary in order not only to smash the old order but also to make progress (Tilly 1992; Huntington 1975:34-5). In other words, in Europe, state capacity increased well before significant democratization occurred; European democracies experienced frequent setbacks or de-democratization (Tilly 2007:164-5, 175-85). As Bagehot (1949:3-4) pointed out, every political system must gain authority and then use authority.

In European history, war had a tremendous impact on the evolution of the state. In his study of European states, Charles Tilly (1992:36) concludes, “state making is essentially a by-product of war making.” The late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries in Europe were periods of intense struggle and conflict; only three years during the entire seventeenth century saw a complete absence of war. The prevalence of war directly promoted a centralization of power and the buildup of a standing army. War making required national unity, the suppression of regional and religious dissidents, the expansion of armies and bureaucracies, and a major increase in state revenues. Thus, “[j]ust as the modern state was needed to create the standing army, so the army created the modern state” (Clark 1961:98).

In the early United States, as in contemporary new states, the achievement of national unity based on national authority was no easy task. The early American Republic was thus legitimized by a charismatic leader; George Washington was idolized as much as many of the contemporary leaders of new states (Lipset 1975:67-8). Germany’s top-down nation building also depended on Otto von Bismarck, the Iron Chancellor and the founder of modern Germany. He was “a ruthless and determined chancellor of blood and iron who would not accept compromise with the enemy” (Frankel 2005:187).

In order to help understand Korea’s nation building, five non-Western countries which are regarded as cases of “successful” nation building were selected and are examined below. Japan and Turkey were selected because their nation buildings took place before 1945. Israel, Singapore, and Taiwan were chosen because these countries faced a serious security dilemma but arguably succeeded in nation building.

Japan's nation building was full of trials and errors (Hayashi 1981:221). Its state building was propelled by fear of foreign domination and opening itself under the threat of foreign warships. Security had thus been a primary concern from the beginning. The Meiji regime also faced internal threats such as peasant riots and Samurai rebellions. Japanese leaders saw the need to create a strong army in order not only to protect its sovereignty from external threats but also to put down dissident groups (Ike 1968:189-93). In order to build up a strong military, the country required a strong economic base. "Rich nation and strong army" thus became a national slogan of post-restoration Japan. Thus, the Meiji elite adopted a German-style centralized emperor system, the most reactionary system among the advanced nations of Europe and North America (Duus 1976:73).

Pre-war Japan began a democratic experiment with a number of "safeguards" against excessive democracy, including a strictly limited suffrage. The Meiji regime promulgated the Police Security Act in 1900, which prohibited freedom of speech and the right of assembly for political purposes. The role of the parliament was also limited. Suffrage was progressively extended until 1925 when all adult males were given the right to vote (Scalapino 1968). From 1936 until 1945 the military took commanding positions in the government.

State making and war making in Japan took place almost at the same time. In a span of some fifty years, Japan fought four major wars—the Sino—Japanese War (1894-1895), the Russo—Japanese War (1904-1905), the China—Japan war (1937-1945), and the Pacific War (1941-1945). Therefore, as the government was authoritarian domestically, its external behavior was imperialistic and militaristic. During the process of its state building, the country experienced absolutism, totalitarianism, imperialism, and militarism (Ike 1968:120-53).

Turkey is regarded as the only country that succeeded in nation building during the first half of the twentieth century. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, a newly created Turkey faced the concurrent challenges of security, identity, and modernization. These challenges were tackled one at a time over an extended period of time: military defense (1919-1922), establishment of a new state (1923-1924), and legal and cultural reforms (1924-1928). Political development was delayed until 1945 when a multi-party system was allowed, and economic development was promoted only in the 1950s and 1960s (Ward and Rustow 1964:458).

Although Turkey adopted a democratic constitution, its democratic institutions are in practice attenuated by the monarchical and aristocratic elements implicit in a one-party regime with paternal leadership. Kemal Atatürk, a charis-

matic leader and the founding father of modern Turkey, was president for life: beginning in 1923 he was continuously elected president by the National Assembly until his death in 1938. The president exercised absolute power and ruled the country by decree, not by democratic process.

After a Kurdish revolt in the eastern provinces in 1925, the draconian “Law for the Maintenance of Order” was passed; the law gave the government wide extraordinary powers, establishing dreadful revolutionary courts, imposing a strict press censorship, closing down all opposition parties, and making the country a one-party rule until 1945. Martial law was immediately declared in 1925, and the government took vigorous steps to suppress the rebels, having many thousands of them imprisoned and many hundreds hanged (Özbudun 1981:81).

Turkey pursued social reform from above. The government intervened in all social, economic, cultural, and educational activities in order to lead the country with the least delay to prosperity and welfare (Dumont 1984:39-41). Atatürk said that “At the beginning of any enterprise there is need...to go from above downward” (Rustow 1981). He believed that in order to revive his country, to teach the people with a whip, not a pen, is the only means (Rustow 1970:240-1). Nevertheless, he is widely respected as the father of the nation by Turkish people.

Israel succeeded in nation building under an acute security dilemma (Beilin 1993). Owing to the departure of British authorities, the influx of refugees from abroad, and external and internal threats from Arabs, the survival of Israel has been at stake from the beginning. Surrounded by bigger Arab states and facing continuous protests and terrorist attacks from Palestinians within its territory, it has been difficult to distinguish between internal and external threats. Israeli nation building also coincided with war making. With frequent wars, such as the War of Independence (1948), the Five-day War (1956), the Six-day War (1967) and the October War (1973), national security issues remained at the top of the national agenda (Horowitz 1993:11).

Under the circumstances, the country tried to ensure maximum centralization of power and maximum unity. A security-first policy was inevitably at odds with the principles of democracy. In terms of national priorities, democracy has been behind other national agendas such as security. During its first decade and a half (1948-1963) Israeli democracy was paternalistic, personalistic, and top-heavy.

The country has no written constitution and no law protecting basic human rights; the government has the right of “administrative detention” of suspicious persons for six months; and it imposes curfews (Sharfman 1993). For reasons of state security, public safety, or the maintenance of public order, from the day of

independence it has maintained Emergency Regulations which include limitations on immigration and freedoms of the press, speech, movement, and demonstration.

Arabs in Israel (15% of its population) have been regarded as potential enemies; they were under military rule for the first eighteen years (1948-66) and then under covert surveillance. Military governors and officials interfered in almost every aspect of the lives of Arab residents, imposing military injunctions on a regular basis to detain or restrict the movement of activists, to outlaw a publication or organization, or to declare areas closed and lands confiscated (Smootha 1993:105-27).

Since independence in 1965, Singapore experienced an acute sense of vulnerability. Many of the reasons for state failure—geostrategic disadvantage, lack of a common social heritage, and ethnic divisions—applied to the country, and prospects of survival as an independent state were low. Its sudden separation from Malaysia was fraught with insecurity, facing threats from Malaysia and other big neighbors. It also faced internal threats; ethnic conflict was rooted in loyalties and identities with larger neighbors. It had been the target of Communist-led disturbance; there were always Communist-inspired strikes and protests. In addition, the withdrawal of British troops in 1971 exacerbated its economic and security crisis. British bases provided for some one-sixth of Singaporean employment and their contribution to its GDP was estimated to be 14 percent (Tan and Tay 2005:252-69).

Singapore's nation building was a 'nation building from above' led by its charismatic leader Lee Kuan Yew. Internally, the country quickly strengthened its security posture by developing armed forces and aggressively promoting economic growth. In order to build up its defense capability rapidly and effectively, it selected the Israeli defense system as a model (Chan 1985:140-1). Thus, an Israeli military mission was stationed in Singapore from independence until 1974.

Politically, the country has been widely regarded as a systematically controlled authoritarian state. Politics has been virtually monopolized by the People's Action Party and the country has remained a *de facto* one-party dictatorship for more than four decades. Individuals critical of the government or the ruling party faced prison time and public protest and demonstrations were banned. In the name of social and political stability and for the inducement of foreign investment, the government maintained a strict law-and-order policy; freedom of the press, information, and association has been restricted (Lee 1998; Lee 2000).

Taiwan's nation building parallels that of South Korea in many ways (Maguire 1998). After defeat on the mainland, the Kuomintang regime and its

army had virtually collapsed, and some 2 million mainlanders, including 600,000 soldiers, fled to the island of Taiwan, whose population was just six million at the time. Suddenly Taiwan became a “virtual” colony of the mainlanders. Inevitably, friction soon developed between the Taiwanese and the mainlanders, creating serious crises of identity and legitimacy among the people. The KMT regime thus faced the twin threat of Communist invasion and Taiwanese uprising.

The KMT leadership decided that it had to fight “fire with fire” because national survival was at stake. But it was often difficult to distinguish between Communist subversives and dissidents (Bullard 1997:11). The KMT regime was determined to maintain social order and political stability by monopolizing politics and strictly controlling society. The National Assembly enacted the “Temporary Provisions Effective during the Period of Communist Rebellion,” which suspended the constitution and transferred to the president the rights and powers normally reserved for other branches of government. The provisions allowed Chiang Kai-shek to remain president for life and forbade the formation of any new political party (Bullard 1997:83-4). Since then, for nearly four decades between 1949 and 1987, the KMT ruled the island as a one-party state under martial law. It forbade the registration of any new newspaper, strikes, demonstrations, political rallies, criticism against the government and its policies, and the reading of works published by authors from mainland China (Roy 2003:89-90).

Under the extended period of martial law, the basic rights of the people were almost totally suppressed (Maguire 1998:34). The pervasive security apparatus rooted out and persecuted Communist sympathizers and Taiwanese nationalists. Civilians were subject to arrest by military personnel and trial by military courts. By one estimate, military courts tried more than ten thousand civilians during the martial law period (Tien 1989:111).

The KMT’s nation-building strategy was to build a robust economy and a strong military to deter an attack from China and ultimately recover the mainland. In particular, economic growth was necessary to bolster the legitimacy of the KMT rule and to win a zero-sum legitimacy competition with the mainland (Rubinstein 1994). Thus, the maintenance of security and resultant social and political stability became the preconditions for an economic miracle and ultimately the democratization of Taiwan.

There are some commonalities in the state and nation building of the five countries examined so far. First of all, state capacity increased well before democratization occurred. A strong centralized government led by a charismatic

leader was necessary to tackle difficult tasks in the early stages of nation building. Second, security was a primary concern and, therefore, democracy was frequently compromised. Finally, economic development was considered the second most important task because it was regarded as a condition for security and democratization.

## **State and Nation Building in South Korea**

Despite its spectacular success, Korea's state and nation building has not been adequately assessed. What were Korea's state building challenges and how did the Rhee government respond? How is its nation building different from and similar to that of the countries discussed in the previous section? What was the role of President Syngman Rhee in state and nation building? This section will answer these questions.

### *Challenges in State Building*

After liberation, Korea faced revolutionary turmoil due to the deprivation experienced by the Korean people during the colonial period, hatred against Japanese collaborators, and a social and economic crisis resulting from a virtual political and administrative vacuum. The division of Korea and the resultant ideological conflict exacerbated the chaos. In addition, the American Military Government (1945-48) was totally unprepared to deal with the crisis. The country suffered not only from the common problems of post-colonial states but also from national division, the devastating Korean War (1950-53), and continuous military and political confrontation with the Communist North.

Korea's challenges in nation building were more daunting than those of any other state (Kim 2007a:21-54). To begin with, the problems of identity and legitimacy had become serious obstacles to nation building. A sense of national identity had already been fatally damaged by colonial rule. The national division and the establishment of two separate governments on the peninsula exacerbated the crises of identity and legitimacy.

Second, the post-1945 Korean economy had virtually collapsed mainly due to three factors: 1) its separation with the North which had most heavy industries, major coal deposits, and almost all the developed electric power, 2) the sudden severing of the Korean economy from the Japanese economic bloc, and

3) hyper-inflation caused by the rapid expansion in the money supply before and after liberation and by the collapse of the South Korean manufacturing industry (Kim and Kim 1997:7-8).

The partition of the country produced a heavy influx of refugees from the North, and two and a half million returned from Japan and other countries. As a result, the South Korean population, estimated at just over 16 million in 1945, grew by 21 percent the following year (Oliver 1948:32). Most of the returnees stayed in major cities and survived based on a government supply of necessities. Widespread poverty, massive unemployment, and dreadful hyperinflation caused a revolutionary situation. In fact, about half of the South Korean labor force was unemployed. The Korean economy required an urgent rehabilitation and reorientation but the American Military Government only tried to “prevent disease and unrest,” deteriorating the social and economic crisis (Reeve 1963:101-3).

Finally, the country faced serious internal and external threats. Post-1945 South Korea was on the verge of a social revolution. The political, economic, and social legacy of the harsh Japanese rule produced a chaotic situation which was described by an American official as “a powder keg ready to explode at the application of a spark” (FRUS 1945). The Communists, which were well-organized and well-disciplined, exploited the chaotic situation for their purposes. After the departure of the Japanese, members of the South Korean Communist party were estimated to number about 40,000 and there were a larger number of sympathizers (Suh 1967:53-141).

Furthermore, support from Russian troops in the North and northern Communists made South Korean Communists very aggressive. The most well known Communist-led rebellion was the Autumn Uprising in October 1946, which lasted for two months and swept through some seventy-three cities and districts, including Daegu, the third largest city in Korea. According to a Korean police account, more than two million Koreans participated in the uprising, resulting in 30,500 casualties, including 300 dead and 3,600 missing (Kim 1995:203).

In addition, the contrasting approaches of the United States and the Soviet Union created additional difficulties for South Korea’s state building. The Soviets had a significant strategic stake in Korea and had an ambitious plan to establish a prototype Stalinist regime in the North, and vigorously implemented the plan from the beginning of their occupation. Stalin secretly ordered his generals in the Soviet Far East “to establish a bourgeois democratic regime in Soviet-controlled territories” (Lee 2006:42). The Soviets brought in some twenty to thirty thousand Soviet Koreans who were thoroughly indoctrinated in

Soviet ideology to the North (Lankov 2002). They thus quickly stabilized and improved the situation in the North. The Soviet strategy was similar to the one adopted in Eastern Europe, as Moscow was attempting to form a united front that would extend control over the South (Matray 2002:64).

In contrast, the United States had no strategic interest and no plan in Korea. It was also pessimistic about the future of the country. Therefore, it lacked a strong “will” to create a democratic government in Korea (Haslam 1997:224). Due to severe economic and political crises in Europe and the Middle East at the time, the United States increased economic and military aid for the Atlantic and Mediterranean regions and did not have enough troops and resources available to maintain forces in Korea. Washington decided to remove U.S. forces from South Korea as soon as possible (Stueck 1981).

While the South Korean situation was deteriorating, the North was stabilizing rapidly thanks to its relatively favorable conditions. Although it had most of the natural resources, abundant electric power, and heavy industry, it had only one-third of the total population. In addition, its state building started from early 1946, about three years earlier than in South Korea. From early 1946 the Kim Il Sung regime monopolized political power, built up its own large security apparatus, and purged those who opposed or criticized the Communist regime (Armstrong 2003). Thus it could maintain internal order, nationalize major industries and firms, and mobilize manpower and resources to speed up its state building. In fact, by the end of 1947 a separate state had emerged in the North. It possessed all the necessary attributes for a new state: borders, government, currency, legislation, and an army of 120,000~150,000 men. In early 1948 a draft of its constitution was ready.

### *State Building during the Rhee Administration*

The establishment of the Republic of Korea was accomplished by Syngman Rhee under extremely unfavorable circumstances. No government anywhere in the world could deal adequately with such a set of compounded problems. Without Rhee’s understanding of the international situation surrounding the Korean Peninsula and the intentions of the Soviet Union and North Korean Communists, and his vision, courage and persistence, the birth of the Republic would have been uncertain.

In terms of nation building, the Communists were well planned, well organized and offensive, while the democratically-oriented South Koreans were less

prepared, passive, and laissez-faire. In the North, Communists could monopolize power, control society, and mobilize resources while the Rhee government was constrained by democratic institutions and opposition groups. Aiming for a Communist revolution in the South, the Communists in the South had secret disciplined organizations which used various subversive means such as infiltration, propaganda, protest, violence, and armed revolt. Therefore, the South Korean government faced serious challenges in state and nation building.

Rhee recognized the nature of Communism better than any other leader. Since the Communists in the North had virtually finished the establishment of a separate government and had a strong influence on the leftists in the South, while South Korea was divided between the left and the right and among the rightists themselves, he believed that a left-right coalition government on the peninsula would sooner or later be overrun by the Communists. Unlike some idealists, he thought it was inevitable to establish a free and independent government in the South and continue to pursue reunification.

At the time, however, South Koreans were sharply divided on the establishment of a separate government in the South. Prominent conservative leaders such as Kim Koo and Kim Kyusik and their followers opposed the elections as well as the establishment of the Republic. They wanted to establish a unified government and visited Pyeongyang in order to negotiate with the North Korean Communists. But their efforts failed because what North Koreans wanted was to sabotage the establishment of a South Korean government, not the creation of a unified government. While the South Korean leaders were negotiating with Kim Il Sung in Pyeongyang, Stalin approved the draft and on April 28, 1948, the constitution was officially approved by the People's Assembly. The invitation of the South Korean leaders to the North, which was a propaganda maneuver against the South, was initiated by the Soviet Politburo (Lankov 2002:41-5).

The Rhee government was extremely weak: it inherited neither a functioning government nor trained manpower. It also lacked resources. Although the constitution gives the president strong power, the president could not exercise such power because the government did not have the capacity to carry out its policies. The constitution, which is patterned after the American Constitution, "created a government of separate institutions struggling for power" (Kim 1983:15). Colonial rule had destroyed the power structure of Korean society: landlords and former bureaucrats were distrusted as Japan collaborators. In addition, politically organized groups, mostly returned from abroad, had diverse ideological orientations and thus were divided.

Thus, the government struggled for its own survival immediately after its establishment. As most Koreans had never accepted it, the partition of Korea perpetuated the problems of identity and legitimacy. The formation of mutually antagonistic states caused a zero-sum competition for survival, legitimacy, and nation building. Each of the two Koreas claimed its legitimacy to govern the entire territory and denounced the other as illegitimate. In addition, for some, reunification became a primary goal in inter-Korean relations, while, for others, security was the most important. North Korea was thus seen as an enemy as well as a partner in reunification.

Setting the destruction of South Korea as its primary goal, North Korea waged an unconventional war against the South to achieve “a socialist revolution in the South.” The strength of Communism is what Philip Selznick (1960) calls the Bolshevik “organizational weapon.” Communists took advantage of, and encouraged, domestic disorder by agitating and supporting dissident activities. Most of all general strikes, protests, riots, and rebellions in the South were believed to be instigated by the Communists. They penetrated and manipulated all important sectors of society using all forms of tactics including espionage, propaganda, agitation, sabotage, strikes, deception, secrecy, and “united fronts.” The non-military component of Communist strategy was as important, if not more important, as the military component.

The North Korean political war against the South led to an acute security crisis in the South (McCune 1950:262-4). The security crisis in South Korea thus was far more serious and protracted than that of any other country, because the security crisis was closely related with a crisis of identity and legitimacy. In a country faced with the threat of a Communist revolution, internal security was as important, if not more important, than external security. Under the circumstances, there was bewildering confusion of democratic practices with national security affairs, because it was often difficult to distinguish between Communists and dissidents. There was an urgent need for strong police action. Since the police was relatively better prepared than the military, the government could not but depend upon the police to maintain public order and fight against the insurgents.

In order to obstruct the general elections to establish the Republic of Korea, the Communists initiated a major rebellion on Jeju Island in early April 1948. Only two months after the inauguration of the Rhee government, some 2,000 troops stationed in the southern city of Yosu, joined by many local leftists, rebelled against the government by refusing an order to fight against the Communist rebels on Jeju who virtually controlled the island for almost seven

months. Exact casualty figures of the Yosu rebellion are unknown, though South Korean accounts state that about 1,200 civilians and government forces were killed as well as 1,500 rebels and their supporters (Dong-a ilbo, 1975). More than 1,000 rebels and many other supporters retreated to the mountains and became guerrillas.

The Yosu rebellion created a serious sense of insecurity in the country. This anxiety was aggravated by rumors of an imminent invasion from the North (US National Archives 1949). At the time in China, Mao's Communist forces were also winning a civil war, increasing the sense of insecurity in the South. With American forces scheduled to complete their withdrawal from Korea by the end of June 1949, there was fear that the United States was about to abandon the newborn republic. It was "a time of acute crisis for the ROK government with its very survival at stake" (Merrill 1983:143). South Korea inherited only a 50,000-man ill-equipped and ill-trained constabulary. It was defenseless against the northern enemies and the Communist insurgents within the country. Despite repeated pleas from the Rhee government for military aid, the United States did not reinforce South Korean forces.

After the establishment of the Republic, "infiltration of subversive elements from the North rapidly mounted and domestic unrest intensified to an almost uncontrollable degree" (Cho 1963:231). The number of Communists and their sympathizers in the South was unknown, but one estimate placed the number of active guerrillas at about 27,000 (Editorial Committee on War History 1981:499-500). According to official U.S. reports, in the spring of 1949 guerrilla forces controlled "most of the rural areas" in South Jeolla Province and other major mountain areas throughout the nation while Jeju remained "virtually overrun" by leftist rebels (US National Archives 1949). The internal security situation steadily descended into anarchy and, by mid-1949, the government faced rebellion and guerrilla attacks in five of eight South Korean provinces. In many rural areas, the government ruled during the day, but Communist guerrillas ruled at night. During the anti-guerrilla campaigns of October 1948 to August 1949, some 9,536 rebels were killed, wounded, or captured (Cumings 1973:144).

As a response to the Yosu rebellion, the National Security Law was promulgated in December 1948. Using the law the government embarked on a widespread purge of Communists and Communist sympathizers in the military, the government and other organizations, and it launched counter-guerrilla operations. It purged some 5,000 officers and men from the military and many more from other sectors from late 1948 to the summer of 1949 (Scalapino and Lee

1972:309). The foreign media criticized the security measures as being brutal authoritarianism. President Rhee was ridiculed as a “little Chiang Kai-shek” and the government was seen as going down the same route as the KMT regime in China. Despite such odds the government was successful in fighting against the Communists during this critical period (Merrill 1983:153-4). Unless an anti-Communist government firmly and effectively resisted Communist infiltration and subversion, it would have been undermined and ultimately destroyed.

Nevertheless, the opponents of Syngman Rhee were busy challenging the Rhee government. Immediately after the inauguration of the Republic, Rhee's opponents who controlled the National Assembly waged a political war against the president. The largest party, the Korea Democratic Party, demanded that the post of prime minister and half of the cabinet be filled by its members, but their demands were rejected by the president. He did so because he believed the party represented landlords and Japanese collaborators. Thus, only three days after taking office, the president suffered a major blow when the assembly rejected his nomination of prime minister. A few days later the opposition again introduced a National Traitor Law in order to weaken the power base of the Rhee government by removing some cabinet members they disliked and other officials including police officers (Henderson 1968:289). Although the president was seriously concerned with the impending security crisis and opposed the scheduled withdrawal of the American troops for the end of June 1949, in October 1948 one-quarter of the assembly signed a resolution calling for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops. Furthermore, the assembly passed ‘no confidence’ resolutions that forced the resignations of Rhee's cabinet ministers one after another, delayed budget bills and other government-sponsored bills, and introduced a constitutional amendment for a cabinet system to kick Rhee out of office when his term expired in 1952 (Merrill 1989). The president had no power to counterbalance the assembly. His authority was further constrained by American officials upon whom his government depended for military and economic aid.

The fragile Rhee government was ill-prepared to take over other burdens of national management, previously a Japanese monopoly, and had to do so under chaotic conditions. Very limited tax revenues and heavy defense expenditures created a fiscal crisis. For instance, in the fiscal year 1949-1950, only 5 percent of the national budget was generated through taxation (author's interview with Song In-Sang). The government thus tried to print money in order to expand and train the army and police but the American authorities, concerned with inflation, opposed such a plan. The United States was reluctant to provide economic aid

for South Korea to defuse the economic crisis. Although U.S. Secretary of State Acheson stated that the government would fall “within three months” if economic assistance were not provided, the U.S. Congress opposed pouring money down such a “rathole” (McCune 1950:254-5). At the time nearly all of Washington’s attention was focused on post-war reconstruction and security in Europe and Korea, which was “of little strategic interest” to the U.S., was virtually ignored (Breuer 1996:11).

### *The Korean War and Korea’s Nation Building*

The Korean War (1950-1953) had a devastating effect on South Korea. The number of South Korean casualties was almost 2 million, and the physical damage was estimated to be 3.1 billion dollars, greater than the GDP of the country at the time (Kim and Kim 1997:11). The war damaged some 43 percent of the pre-war industrial facilities (Hwang 1971:71). At the same time, the war led Korea to become a member of the worldwide anti-Communist bloc and provided it with an opportunity to build a modern state. In studies of Korean politics, the linkage between security (including war) and politics has received limited attention. As discussed earlier, war making is closely related to nation building because a war provides an opportunity for territorial consolidation, centralization of authority, and mobilization of manpower and resources. Thus, the war was a defining event for contemporary Korea and it set the state agenda for all subsequent Korean regimes. In particular, with the characteristics of both civil and interstate war, it played a crucial role in Korea’s nation building.

First of all, the war helped strengthen the legitimacy of President Rhee and his government. As a Western scholar put it, the war “gave Rhee what the South Korean president could never have gained on his own in a thousand years—a just cause and a banner of moral legitimacy” (Hastings 1991:57). Most South Koreans were victims of the tragic war in one way or another, such that many of them became rigid anti-Communists. In addition, millions of North Korean refugees reinforced anti-Communist sentiments in the South. Many who had previously been either sympathetic or tolerant of Communists became at least seemingly anti-Communists afterward. The official doctrine of anticommunism was widely accepted among the populace, and Rhee’s uncompromising anti-Communism became a long-standing principle in South Korea’s domestic and foreign policy. The war thus helped consolidate Rhee’s position as the supreme leader and key spokesman for the nation. Furthermore, the participation of the

forces of many UN-member states in the war strengthened the legitimacy of the government domestically and internationally. As a result, the war significantly weakened President Rhee's political opponents who challenged the government before.

Second, the war led to a centralization of power which is an essential prerequisite for nation building, as the history of European states shows. President Rhee exercised emergency powers, and the government mobilized manpower and resources and strengthened social control. The war and post-war confrontation perpetuated a sense of danger and emergency and justified authoritarianism. With his strengthened legitimacy and power, Rhee could overrun the challenges of his political opponents for the first time since his inauguration. He forced a constitutional amendment for a popular presidential election. After his landslide victory in the 1952 direct presidential election, he became a president independent from the National Assembly, and when his ruling party won a majority in the assembly in 1954 general elections, his regime was able to assert strong political power for the first time in Korean constitutional history.

Finally, the war provided Korea with an opportunity to build a strategic bond with the United States, the most powerful country in the West and a model of democracy and a market economy. Rhee had long emphasized the importance of diplomacy to Korea's independence, survival, and prosperity. From the beginning of his presidency, he tried to create a collective security mechanism. His consistent demand for a U.S.—Korea security pact ultimately succeeded. Becoming the ally of the United States, Korea could transform itself from a fragile and isolated country into the anti-Communist bastion of the Far East supported by Western countries.

The American security commitment and the presence of American forces in Korea ensured the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula that created a favorable environment for economic growth and democratization in coming decades. A defense pact with the United States was crucial for Korea's nation building because the United States would provide economic and other assistance as long as it regarded Korean security and stability as important to its strategic interests (Brazinsky 2007). In other words, Korea could resolve the simultaneous crises of security and economy through the security pact.

Economically, Korea had to build a viable economy sooner or later in order to survive and prosper under the North Korean threat. However, the reconstruction policy of the Rhee administration was greatly constrained by the United States, which provided the aid for the reconstruction. Placing their priorities upon check-

ing inflation and providing a minimum standard of living for the Korean people, the United States provided final products such as consumer goods and some intermediate goods (Krueger 1979:78). In addition, American aid had a predominantly military focus, which kept the Korean economy afloat. At the time, the United States was focused on reconstructing European and Japanese economies and had limited resources to support Korea's industrialization.

After the 1959 Communist revolution in Cuba, the United States realized that poverty and underdevelopment rendered countries vulnerable to Communism. To fight against the non-conventional warfare of the Communists in the Third World, the Kennedy Administration made modernization a focal point of U.S. foreign assistance (Latham 2000). Walter Rostow (1962), a security advisor to President John F. Kennedy, maintained that development was the key to defeating Communism in the Third World. Thus, Washington persuaded Tokyo to normalize its relations with Seoul and to support the economic development programs of the Park Chung Hee administration. As an ally of the United States, Korea's participation in the Vietnam War also led to tremendous economic benefits for Korea. If the normalization of relations with Japan was a critical component in Park's ambitious industrialization plan, the Vietnam War was a fortuitous economic bonanza for the country; the economic benefits were estimated to be as much as \$10 billion (MacDonald 1992:110). At the same time, Korea could export its products to American markets because the United States supported the economic development of its key ally.

Based on the discussion thus far and in contradiction of the common view, one may argue that the Rhee administration succeeded in state building under challenging circumstances and laid the basic foundations for nation building—establishment of modern legal and administrative systems, build-up of a viable security system including an alliance and a strong military, and social reforms such as land reform and mass education. Now in Korea it is increasingly recognized that Rhee's vision and commitment were necessary and crucial for building the basic foundations of modern Korea. Upon these bases built by Rhee, Park Chung Hee succeeded in tackling the second task of nation building—economic development. Park's developmental strategy was export-oriented industrialization, not import-substitution. Therefore, Korea had to reform, open up, reach out to foreign markets, and compete with other countries. Such a strategy required the expansion of mass higher education, a middle class, and civil society. The economy-first development thus led to the development of democracy. If Korean security was more unstable and/or if its economic growth was un-

cessful, it is uncertain whether its democratization would have been as successful as it has been.

Although the three tasks of Korea's state and nation building (national security and stability, economic growth, and democracy) competed in Korean politics throughout its post-1948 history, the priority shifted from the achievement of security and stability to that of economic prosperity, and finally to an extension of political liberty. This sequence of priorities allowed development to be completed in stages—conditions for the success of each stage being built upon the one preceding it. It appears that Korea's nation building has been successful under very difficult circumstances because it pursued a realistic step-by-step approach to nation building.

## Conclusion

This paper analyzed why Korea's nation building was successful despite extremely unfavorable conditions. Before the Republic was properly established, the fragile state was struck by war and faced continuous emergency conditions. Under the circumstances, the priority accorded to security by the Rhee administration was necessary. In a poor country which was also economically competing with the North, security was not enough; economic development was also urgent. During the crucial first thirty years of the history of the Republic, under the leadership of presidents Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee, Korea succeeded in overcoming the two critical problems in nation building—security crisis and poverty. From a liberal democratic perspective, however, both Rhee and Park could be criticized for their authoritarianism. But from a nation-building perspective, the country needed a strong government led by a charismatic leader in order to survive and build the economy. Their realistic approaches were necessary and, therefore, largely successful if we understand why Premier Chang Myon's democracy-first idealistic approach ended in disaster in 1960-61 (Han 1974). As Max Lerner wrote, "ideals and ethics are important as norms, but they are scarcely effective as techniques" (Machiavelli 1950: iii).

The South Korean government, which is based on the American principle of checks and balance, was very weak such that it was almost impossible to meet such formidable challenges and tackle the difficult tasks of nation building. Democracy was transplanted onto a debilitated and inhospitable political soil. It lacked any social basis for democracy; rather it faced what Clinton Rossiter

(1948:6) calls “threats to democracy,” such as war, economic crisis, and social unrest. In addition, the newly introduced democratic principles were nearly the opposite of the premises upon which life had been built for most Koreans up to the moment of liberation. Korean trials and errors in democracy were perhaps inevitable.

The Korean situation needed a strong government. The Korean War gave President Rhee an opportunity to create such a relatively strong government, which is necessary for nation building. In the early stages of nation building when institutions are underdeveloped, the role of leadership is much more important than in developed democracies. Without Rhee’s charismatic leadership in centralizing power, maintaining a firm commitment to anti-Communism, and securing a security alliance with the United States, the destiny of the Republic might have been different. Without Park’s strong and effective leadership, it might have been difficult for Korea to escape “a vicious circle of poverty.” The approaches of Rhee and Park to nation building are not very different from those of the leaders of other successful countries discussed earlier.

In short, the 60-year history of the Republic is a successful one, not a “failed” or “shameful” one as often expressed by some Korean progressives. Koreans need to rid themselves of the negative image of their country in terms of a past failed democracy and find a new sense of national identity based on Korea’s success in nation building. The world is struggling with so many failed, failing, or unstable states. Korea’s success in nation building may become an invaluable lesson for many Third World countries and for the advanced countries attempting to help developing nations.

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The united states in historical and comparative perspective. Seymour martin lipset. Basic Books, INC. Publishers \*. On the methodological side, Karl Deutsch has shown the way for those who seek to fully incorporate comparative historical and social analysis into systematic social science. Both he and Parsons, who have worked together on these problems, have shown the value to scholarship of men who are not afraid to present new, incomplete, and untested approaches for the rest of social science to elaborate or reject. Significant innovators in any field must be prepared to learn that they have been in error; these are the risks inherent in opening new perspectives on old problems. Bruce Cumings provides a historical explanation of the strong state in Korea and Taiwan in "The Origins and Development of the Northeast Asian Political Economy," *International Organization* 38 (Winter 1984), 1-40. See also Jones and Sakong (fn. 1); Wade and White (fn. 42); Launius, Michael, "The State and Labor in South Korea," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 16 (October and December 1984), 7-43. Jung Suk Suh, "Daehan Nochongul Haebeu Handa" [The Anatomy of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions], *Shin Dong Ah*, April 1985, pp. 482-508; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 19, 1984, pp. 73-74. Association of South East Asian Nations. ASEAN+3 ASEAN + China, Japan and South Korea. BASIC. Brazil, South Africa, India, China. BIMST-EC Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. BJP. Such a state of affairs often results in efforts by the new powers to challenge the position of the dominant state(s).<sup>8</sup> Writing from a realist perspective, Robert Gilpin noted that power shifts have occurred when the international system is in disequilibrium and rising powers calculate that the benefits accruing from challenging the dominant power exceed the costs.<sup>9</sup> *Surveying the historical. The North and South Korean Political System. A Comparative Analysis*, Boulder/Seoul. Block IV herausforderungen und perspektiven der politischen entwicklung. Gause, Ken E. (2006). Gries, Peter Hays; Rosen, Stanley (Hrsg.) (2004). *State and Society in 21st-Century China. Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation*, New York/London. Heberer, Thomas; Schubert, Gunter (Hrsg.)