

Beyond Patron and Client: Historicizing the Dialectics of US-ROK Relations amid Park Chung Hee's Independent Defense Industry Development in South Korea, 1968–1979*

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In 1968, in response to lackluster US support for Republic of Korea (ROK) military modernization amid rising North Korean threats, the Park Chung Hee regime (1961–1979) instituted the policy of “self-reliant national defense,” or *chaju kukpang*, which was centered on building a national defense industry in the 1970s. The wide-ranging impact of this policy is examined, including the way that it reshaped the US-ROK alliance. Previous studies of ROK military modernization have focused largely on the dominating influences of US arms transfers and military aid, but these studies have not acknowledged the full extent to which South Korea's proactive measures challenged US restrictions throughout the 1970s. The present study taps recently declassified sources from both the US and Korea and argues that distinct strategies of ROK arms production—including Park's *chaju kukpang* initiatives, heavy and chemical industrialization (HCI), and mobilization of *chaeböl*—along with US factors, elicited significant concessions in US policy on Korea. By examining particular forces of the ROK defense industry that impacted US-ROK relations, it is then further argued that past studies on the US-ROK relationship based on a patron-client model have failed to elucidate dialectics in the relationship that remained in constant flux throughout the 1970s, as the Park regime actively resisted dependency on US patronage for arms. Most significantly, by initiating independent military programs the ROK swayed US policy to favor Korea's

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defense development and program for building a self-reliant national defense.

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Early Cold War literature on superpower relations with client states¹ shaped the perspective of international relations scholars like Shin Wookhee (Sin Ukhŭi), who in turn applied a “patron-client state” model to explain South Korea’s postwar development within the US-ROK alliance.² This model interprets ROK decision-making as externally driven by asymmetrical structural ties with the US. As a result, the intricacies of factors internal to ROK policymaking are undermined.³ Likewise, early studies of South Korea’s defense

1. See, for example, Christopher C. Shoemaker and John Spanier, *Patron-Client State Relationships* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984) and Marshall R. Singer, *Weak States in a World of Powers: The Dynamics of International Relationships* (New York: Free Press, 1972).

2. Shin Wookhee, *Dynamics of Patron-Client State Relations: The United States and Korean Political Economy in the Cold War* (Seoul: American Studies Institute, Seoul National University, 1993).

3. Explanations cite such factors as the ROK’s “fear of [US] abandonment” to explain Park’s