
‘Will [the] US renew war with us [to] accomplish [the] original objective, [the] unification of Korea by force, without unnecessary delay [after the failure of Geneva conference]? If [the] US cannot or will not do this, we ask you [to] grant our … request to increase our Land Forces together with Air and Sea Forces commensurate with it.’

(Syngman Rhee, 8 April 1954)

[We]must not reply to [the above letter of] President Rhee by throwing a wet fish in his face … [The US needs to give] a quick reply to Rhee which would have as its theme, “We still love you, you s.o.b.”

(Dwight D. Eisenhower, 13 April 1954)

The signing of the armistice agreement on 27 July 1953 put an end to the long and bitter conflict in Korea, leaving the peninsula divided as it had been before the war. According to the armistice agreement, the Korean question was to be discussed at a subsequent political conference. While Kim Il Sung in the North appeared to adopt a peaceful policy and set up a long-term plan for economic reconstruction, President Syngman Rhee appeared not to be prepared to commit himself fully to peace. As Rhee made it clear shortly after the armistice agreement, he did ‘not approve’ of it, but simply intended ‘not to disturb’ it while a political conference was attempting to solve the Korean problem. Rhee hoped that, if the conference failed to find a solution, the US would join the South Koreans in undertaking unification by force. With such a pessimistic view on the likelihood of
a peaceful settlement of the Korean issue, Rhee was reluctant to participate in the conference. When the political conference broke up without any result, as Rhee had expected it would, he voiced the call to ‘march north’ more loudly again.

Just as there was little change in Rhee’s view on unification, so there was little movement in his posture towards the United States. President Rhee continued to be intransigent, and unpredictable. Above all, he did not stop threatening that he would act unilaterally if necessary. During the period from September 1953 to November 1954, when US military and economic assistance programmes were set up, Rhee utilized this threat tactically, as before, to obtain further security commitments from the US. Although Rhee’s concern for domestic politics increased with the armistice, his priority was still maintaining the security of South Korea, and in particular, gaining a US commitment to strengthening ROK forces, which is the main focus of this chapter.

First, this chapter will discuss President Rhee’s attempt to consolidate his power in order to assess the relationship between Rhee’s concern for domestic and external affairs. The second section will examine Rhee’s hard line concerning the political conference, and his effort to extract support for the expansion of South Korean military capabilities from the US, which needed Rhee’s cooperation in the conference for its own reasons. In the third section, this chapter will study the post-Geneva conference period when American security commitments in South Korea were finalized through Rhee’s summit talks with President Eisenhower, and the subsequent discussions between the two governments.

RHEE’S ATTEMPT TO CONSOLIDATE HIS DOMESTIC POSITION

After the end of the conflict with the northern Communists, President Rhee’s concern for domestic politics began to grow. Rhee’s first objective was to rebuild the Liberal Party (LP) as his loyal organ. For this purpose, in September 1953, President Rhee called for the expulsion of the Yi Pōm-sŏk faction, which had become too powerful to be left unchecked. During the next few months, Rhee dismissed a number of Yi’s supporters in the government and in the party. Yi himself was purged in December. Thereafter, Yi Ki-pung, Rhee’s long-time and trusted associate, who had served as the Chief-Secretary of the President and as Defence Minister, took over as LP leader.