‘We know what Communism is, and we do not think for an instant that it is possible to appease its ambitions. We do not try to co-exist with cholera.’

(Syngman Rhee, 1 March 1955)

‘If the government makes a mistake or is wanting in ability, it should be forgiven or covered for the sake of the battle against the national enemy … Legislators must give priority to saving the country, putting trivial [domestic] matters off until a later date.’

(Syngman Rhee, 21 February 1955)

In November 1954, with the signing of the agreed minute on political, economic and military matters, and the coming into effect of the Mutual Defence Treaty between the United States and South Korea, the basic framework of the US security commitment to South Korea had been established. With the long and arduous negotiations to obtain substantial support from the US virtually over, Syngman Rhee began to face internal and external difficulties which threatened to weaken the stability of his regime.

Domestically, President Rhee had to cope with the creation of a strengthened opposition party and a decrease in his legitimacy, both of which were mainly caused by the unprincipled procedure adopted in revising the Constitution. Internationally, the possibility of peaceful coexistence between the Western world and the Communists – as exemplified by the Geneva Summit of 1955 – faced Rhee with a dilemma not only because he wished to achieve the unification of
Korea by force, but also because his political stand was based on strong anti-Communism. In an attempt to overcome these problems, Rhee fiercely criticized any movement toward peaceful coexistence, and tried to demonstrate the Communist menace. To this end, he highlighted the issue of expelling the Czech and Polish members of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), whose activities allegedly helped North Korea’s military build-up.

This chapter will first study the internal and external developments that troubled Rhee. Then it will examine how and why Rhee condemned the relaxation of world tensions. It will also study how President Rhee used the NNSC issue to justify his objections to the idea of peaceful coexistence with the Communists.

INTERNAL DIFFICULTIES: THE LEGITIMACY CRISIS AND THE STRENGTHENED OPPOSITION

On 6 September 1954, a constitutional amendment bill was proposed by the ruling Liberal Party (LP), and introduced in the National Assembly on November 18. The bill was intended to pave the way for ‘presidency for life’ for President Rhee and to consolidate the supremacy of the executive over the legislature.¹ When the ballot was finally voted on in the National Assembly on November 27, 135 voted in favor of the amendment, and 60 against it, with seven abstentions. The Liberal Vice-Speaker Ch’oe Sun-chu announced that the bill had been rejected as only 135 members had voted in favour out of a total of 203 Assemblymen, based on the generally accepted assumption that 136 votes were needed for the two-thirds majority to pass the bill. In an emergency meeting held on the evening of the same day, however, Rhee and his supporters undertook a reinterpretation, known as sa-sa-o-ip (drop four [tenths], add five). Their arguments were that 135.33 was the exact numerical two-thirds of 203, that the generally accepted mathematical practice was to disregard a fraction below 0.5, and that, therefore, 135 was the number of votes required to pass the bill. On November 28, the Rhee government announced that it considered that the Assembly had accepted the constitutional revision. Next day, Vice-Speaker Ch’oe declared in the Assembly that he had been mistaken and that the bill had indeed passed. After the opposition walked out of the Assembly in protest, the remaining Liberal members, under the chairmanship of Speaker Yi Ki-pung, unanimously agreed to change the November 27 minutes