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for “Peace” between South and
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Disarmament and the Search for “Peace” between South and North Korea in the Late 1950s

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Germany and South Korea share the history of division, and despite the heightened tensions of the Cold War, the late 1950s were a period when peaceful coexistence was sought in both Europe and Asia. The two Koreas, in particular, fought for three years from 1950 on, and despite the fact that military tensions were still very high, they both began disarmament in the mid-1950s. Considering these historical experiences and understanding their characteristics is of particular importance given the reality that wars are still going on in Ukraine and Israel. It is hoped that Korea's historical experience will contribute to peace in Europe as well as Korea.

1. Preface

The year 1956 was significant both in the context of the Cold War and in the context of North-South Korean relations. In February 1956, Soviet Secretary-General Khrushchev began a campaign to de-Stalinize the Communist Party at the 20th Congress, and externally, he advocated the possibility of “peaceful coexistence” between the East and the West. In July 1956, Egyptian President Nasser declared the nationalization of the Suez Canal, but was defeated through a military intervention as “punishment” by Britain, France, and Israel. However, with the involvement of U.S. President Eisenhower, who was running for re-election, and the support

¹ Lee Dongwon. "1950-nyöndaehubannambukhanüikunch'ukkwap'yöngghwa'mosaek [in Korean]." *Yöksamunjejön'gu* no. 54 (2024): 327–364.

of international public opinion, he regained the Suez Canal and emerged as a “hero” of Arab nationalism and non-alignment.

On the Korean Peninsula, the strengthening of power between the South and North took place in a state of military armistice. President Syngman Rhee opened the way to lifelong rule by amending the Constitution in 1954, and then won a third term in the 1956 presidential election, defeating Cho Bong-am, who had proposed a peaceful unification theory. On August 30, 1956, at the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea held at the Pyongyang Art Theater, Minister of Commerce Yun Gong-heum criticized Premier Kim Il-sung's "party dictatorship", heavy industry-first policy, and personality cult tendencies. However, the rash challenge to power led to a large-scale anti-sectarian struggle and accelerated the strengthening of Kim Il-sung's power.

In this way, amidst rosy prospects for peaceful coexistence and doubts about it, military conflicts and heightened tensions, the emergence of a non-aligned line, power struggles and consolidation of power, etc.—which emerged after the armistice of the Korean War in which millions of lives were sacrificed—and despite the fact that the prospects to resolve the ‘Korean issue’ became uncertain after the failure of the Geneva political talks on the Korean Peninsula, both South and North Korea began taking steps to reduce their military spending. On May 31, 1956, North Korea pledged through a government statement to reduce 80,000 Korean People's Army troops and the corresponding military spending by August 31 of that year. In South Korea, the reduction of the Korean military was seriously pursued in accordance with the reduction of US aid to Korea. There was some resistance from the opposition of the Korean government, but on November 18, 1958, the maximum number of Korean troops was reduced by 90,000 from 720,000 to 630,000, through the revision of Appendix B of the ROK-US Agreement.

Previous studies have made it possible to understand the disarmament of North and South Korea in the late 1950s in the context of their respective international relations, but they share the limitation of overlooking the internal context of disarmament that was carried out amidst the continued military tensions between the two Koreas after the armistice. Of course, disarmament always has a fundamentally international political and diplomatic character, but this article seeks to reveal that the disarmament of North and South Korea during this period was also an event that reflected the economic burden of the wartime military buildup

on both sides and the realistic and discursive conditions of the search for 'peace' after the war.

2. North Korea's Disarmament in Response to 'Peaceful Coexistence' and for a Reduction of Defense Spending

The Soviet Union's practical movement toward 'peaceful coexistence' began in earnest in 1955, when Khrushchev took power. Khrushchev's new thinking was based on the belief that the country could reduce dependence on military force and benefit from the demilitarization of the Cold War. The statement on May 31, 1956, regarding the reduction of North Korea's Korean People's Army troops was based on the easing of tensions in international relations that Khrushchev's discourse on 'peaceful coexistence' had actually brought about.

The main contents of the 'Statement of the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the Reduction of Korean People's Army Troops' are as follows:

"The Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, in order to make a new contribution to the maintenance of peace in Korea and to substantially create more favorable conditions for the peaceful reunification of Korea, declares as follows:

- 1) The Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea solemnly declares that it will not use its armed forces first against the South Korean authorities in the future, as it did in the past, unless the South Korean authorities provoke a war against the northern half of the Republic.
- 2) The Armed Forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will be reduced by 80,000 men by August 31, 1956.
- 3) In accordance with the above reduction in armed forces, military equipment and combat equipment will be reduced and the corresponding military expenses will be allocated to peace construction and the improvement of the people's living standards.
- 4) Peaceful occupations will be arranged by the state for soldiers discharged from the Korean People's Army according to their wishes and talents."

What is more noteworthy in the North Korean government statement is the necessity and logic of the Korean Peninsula that it put forth while announcing the reduction of troops and armaments along with the changes in the international situation. First, the statement proposes 'mutual non-aggression' and 'mutual reduction of arms' while presupposing that "the Korean issue must be resolved through negotiations." In addition, it recognizes this as a prerequisite for 'maintaining peace' and 'peaceful unification' and gives it the meaning of a preemptive measure that 'pressures' South Korea to as well take 'substantial measures.' In particular, the part that says "military expenses resulting from the reduction of troops and armaments will be

allocated to peace construction and improving the people's lives" stands out.

The editorial on the front page of the June 1, 1956 *Rodong Sinmun*, in which this statement was published, also explains the meaning of the statement in detail under the title "Active Measures for the Peaceful Resolution of the Korean Question" and points out that under the premise that "the international situation had substantially improved," the 3rd Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea held in April of the same year emphasized the peaceful resolution of the Korean question while "at the same time declaring that the North and South Korean armies should be reduced to a minimum in order to reduce the burden of military expenses and divert them to peaceful construction."

Due to the increased number of troops and military equipment after the Korean War, the economic burden felt by North Korea at this time was as great as that of South Korea. The size of the Korean People's Army at that time was estimated to be around 420,000 to 450,000, and based on this, the reduction of 80,000 troops was a large-scale reduction equivalent to about 18-19% of the existing troops.

This was also possible because of the calculation that the entire Chinese People's Volunteer Army would not be able to withdraw in 1956. After the armistice agreement, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army withdrew by 200,000 between 1954 and 1955, and by 250,000 in 1958, so at least 250,000 Chinese People's Volunteer Army were stationed in North Korea in 1956. The stationing of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army helped suppressing North Korea's military spending and troop levels and supporting postwar economic reconstruction and socialist reform.

According to Kim Yong-hyun's research, the proportion of defense spending in North Korea's total budget was 3 to 10 times more than the officially announced defense budget. After the armistice agreement, both South and North Korea had to invest a large amount of labor and resources in postwar reconstruction, and felt the financial burden of the greatly increased defense budget due to the war. In particular, the fact that North Korea, which had only half the population of South Korea, maintained a standing army equivalent to two-thirds of South Korea's can be evaluated as a situation in which it maintained excessive military power compared to its economic power—even more so than South Korea.

Korea also had a large defense budget burden in the late 1950s, with the defense special account comprising approximately 45-59% of government spending. In particular, in addition

to the US military aid consisting of military products such as weapons, ammunition, and military equipment, the Korean government shouldered approximately 57-62% of the total defense budget through government finances to cover defense expenses. The remaining 38-43% was covered by the Defense Support (DS) aid from the US Mutual Security Program (MSP) aid and the surplus agricultural product aid under US Public Law 480. Therefore, the actual burden of the Korean government was approximately 26-33% of the total military budget.

In summary, it can be seen that North Korea maintained a greater military force at a lower cost compared to South Korea's economic power. North Korea received 1 billion rubles in free aid from the Soviet Union in 1954 and 1955, and China's material aid also played a greater role than that from the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries immediately after the armistice. In addition, it can be interpreted that North Korea's socialist economic system, including agricultural cooperatives in the 1950s, had the effect of reducing the costs of salaries, allowances, food expenses, and retirement pay necessary for maintaining military power compared to South Korea's capitalist economic system.

Nevertheless, the fact that North Korea maintained a standing army of 420,000 to 450,000 soldiers could not help but be a great burden on the North Korean economy at the time. As examined above, the 'Government Statement on Military Reduction' emphasized that "the corresponding military expenses would be allocated to peace construction and improving the people's lives," and the editorial in the *Rodong Sinmun*, which defined the meaning of military reduction as easing international tensions and establishing a solid peace, also emphasized that "the arms race has a direct impact on the economic life of each country and the people's living conditions."

The reduction of 80,000 Korean People's Army troops in North Korea was carried out precisely under these circumstances. On May 28, 1956, three days before the *Rodong Sinmun* published a government statement on the reduction of troops, Foreign Minister Nam Il met with Ambassador Ivanov and informed him that "the Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea has decided to reduce the Korean People's Army troops by 80,000." Nam Il stated that he had discussed this issue with his Chinese comrades and that Zhou Enlai had accepted it positively. He also said that he wanted to proceed with this measure "following the example of the Soviet Union," which meant reporting the reduction of troops in the press in order to ease tensions in Korea and refusing to use weapons to resolve

disputes, and appealing to the South Korean authorities to follow their example. Therefore, North Korea's reduction of its military force and military equipment during this period was partly a response to changes in the international situation represented by the theory of peaceful coexistence, but it also faithfully reflected its economic and military stance of pressuring South Korea to disarm while reducing its defense budget in response to economic difficulties and the people's hardships.

The most important factor that allowed the discharged soldiers to be welcomed in North Korea was the severe labor shortage in North Korea. The drastic decrease in the labor force due to casualties and refugees during the war and the start of industrialization for postwar recovery resulted in a serious shortage of workers. The inevitable choice of a labor-centered economic development strategy also aggravated the labor shortage. In particular, the rapid influx of labor from rural areas to cities led to the collapse of the rural labor force. In the end, the deployment of discharged soldiers to rural areas and coal mines was no different from a forced measure in response to the transfer of labor to the industrial sector. Nevertheless, discharged soldiers were equipped with the physical and mental abilities necessary for arduous work through training and war, and were able to adapt easily to the organizational culture. In addition, they were able to accept the policies of the party and the government well because they had experienced theoretical learning based on regular military education.

3. South Korea's Disarmament in Response to the 'Peace Offensive' and for a 'Sound Economy'

Since the inauguration of the Eisenhower administration, the United States (US) had pursued arms control and arms reduction from a long-term perspective while pursuing the New Look policy. The US was swept up in the McCarthyism storm in the early and mid-1950s and had difficulty actively seeking coexistence with the socialist bloc, but after the successful hydrogen bomb tests by the US and the Soviet Union in 1952 and 1953, the US could not help but worry that a new weapon with unlimited power would bring about a catastrophic end.

President Eisenhower's speech "Atoms for Peace," on December 8, 1953 in front of the UN General Assembly reflected this perception. He advocated for "eliminating the military nature of nuclear weapons and using them for peaceful purposes," and proposed establishing the

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and depositing uranium and fissile material to apply atomic energy to "agriculture, medicine, and other peaceful activities." However, the US position, seeking to negotiate peaceful use of nuclear energy while not entertaining the idea of prohibition of nuclear weapons, and the Soviet Union's position, which was in favor of first prohibiting nuclear weapons in order to achieve a peaceful use of nuclear energy, were in conflict. The US eventually wanted to establish the International Atomic Energy Agency centered on the free world, and was finally able to establish it at the end of July 1957.

Despite this international trend, President Syngman Rhee of South Korea began to advocate a theory of unification through northward advance from the position that coexistence with the communist bloc was impossible from the time the armistice agreement was about to be signed. Opposition newspapers also warned that the US message of reconciliation and peace to the communist bloc, which was raised only four months after the armistice agreement, was a "peace offensive between two camps," and urged that the South Koreans carefully examine its true nature.

On January 9, 1956, the South Korean government, through a statement by Army Chief of Staff Jeong Il-kwon, said, "We have obtained information that the North Korean communist army is receiving training in the use of atomic weapons," and appealed, "In order to prepare for the communist military power, the US should send atomic weapons and regular weapons." On January 12, Minister of National Defense Son Won-il also said, "At a time when the communists are violating the armistice agreement and reorganizing into atomic weapons, we cannot find a reason why only South Korea cannot reorganize into new scientific weapons because it is bound by the armistice agreement," and insisted that the North's use of atomic weapons be treated as a *fait accompli* and that South Korea should not be bound by the armistice agreement.

In this way, the Korean government at this time regarded not only the theory of peaceful coexistence between the socialist bloc and the Third World, but also the US-led 'peaceful use of nuclear energy' in terms of arms control as a 'peace offensive', and instead insisted on 'weapon modernization' including nuclear weapons and the nullification of the armistice agreement.

However, in Korea, 'weapon modernization' represented by the introduction of atomic weapons did not necessarily mean military buildup. On February 25, 1955, the US explicitly stated in NSC 5514 that it would reduce the size of the Korean military. In other words, "In

order to reduce the size of the Korean active-duty forces at an appropriate time, the combat effectiveness of the active-duty forces should be increased and an efficient reserve force should be developed.”

Eisenhower's fiscal conservatism, which pursued a 'sound economy', also promoted the New Look policy to reduce defense spending in the defense sector, so from the US perspective, the reduction of the Korean military became a long-term goal for the soundness of the US budget. Also, although US foreign aid was decreasing overall during this period, the Eisenhower administration's foreign aid policy was characterized by consistent support for the Mutual Security Program (MSP) aid, which focused on military aid, even in the late 1950s.

In the end, the proportion of military aid in U.S. foreign aid exceeded economic aid after the outbreak of the Korean War, and the entire structure of foreign aid was reorganized around military aid. Therefore, while the overall scale of foreign aid decreased after the armistice of the Korean War, the relative proportion of military aid actually increased.

Looking at it by region, since the outbreak of the Korean War, the share of Europe in the US Mutual Security Plan (MSP) has gradually decreased, and even amidst the overall reduction in the scale of US foreign aid, the share of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa has been overwhelmingly superior in terms of the number of regional managers and funding allocation since fiscal year 1954. In particular, the share of East Asia was gradually increasing, as by 1957, US MSP aid had supported the creation and maintenance of 20 divisions in Korea, 21 divisions in Taiwan, 10 divisions in Vietnam, 6 divisions in Japan, 2 divisions in Thailand, and 2 divisions in the Philippines. At this time, Korea was the top priority recipient of military aid in East Asia, along with Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam and Cambodia, followed by Thailand and the Philippines.

However, as the overall scale of US foreign aid decreased, it was inevitable that the absolute scale of aid to Korea would decrease despite its high priority. At the 320th NSC meeting held on April 17, 1957, Secretary of Defense Wilson pointed out that the increase in the Korean military was related to the return of US troops, but that the Korean government also wanted it, and that as a result, the Korean military had become too large and was becoming too much of a burden on the Korean economy. He argued that the US should cut 50 to 70 million dollars, or 5 to 10%, from the current annual 750 million dollars that the US was providing, and that the current level of the Korean military should be gradually reduced.

In response, President Syngman Rhee opposed the reduction of troops, stating that unification and modernization of the ROK military were prerequisites. He sent a letter to President Eisenhower on June 24, clearly stating his position that “the current level of troops must be maintained until unification is achieved, and consideration of a reduction of troops will only be possible after the ROK military modernization program is delivered to the ROK military.”

The news of the reduction of the Korean military gave the impression of a ‘withdrawal of the US commitment’ to Korean society, and led to a widespread ‘anti-troop reduction movement’ not only in the government and military but also in the Korean National Assembly and local communities. Also, the background of this anti-military reduction movement was the issue of discharged soldiers, which had been a social problem since the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement. After the Armistice Agreement, measures for discharged soldiers began to be established in 1954, but the government's policies for discharged soldiers, which numbered 123,800 in 1954 and 196,000 in 1955, were very insufficient.

The problem of living expenses of these discharged soldiers became a more serious problem when, as of November 1956, all soldiers who had served for more than 4 years and 9 months were discharged if they wished to do so, and by the end of August 1957, all those who had served for more than 3 years were to be discharged.

The dispute between South Korea and the US over the reduction of the ROK military and the introduction of modern weapons was settled by the end of 1959, when the total number of ROK troops was reduced to 630,000, but the personnel and equipment of each division were reduced to maintain the 18-division system. This was also a measure to reduce the ROK military force limit of 720,000 to 630,000 as stipulated in Appendix B of the ROK-US Agreed Minutes.

Along with this, ‘modernization of the Korean military’ and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons by the USFK were discussed and reflected in NSC 5702/2, the basic document of the policy on Korea. The 7th and 24th Infantry Divisions of the USFK were transformed into pentomic divisions capable of utilizing tactical nuclear weapons. The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula began in January 1958, and Korea became the second East Asian country to deploy Matador cruise missiles after Taiwan.

4. Conclusion

This study mainly analyzed the process of disarmament realized in South and North Korea from 1956 to 1958, and sought to examine its causes in relation to the changes in the Cold War order and economic situation at the global and Korean Peninsula levels, as well as the discourse on peace. This may have the significance of clarifying historical facts, but it also has the significance of historically exploring the possibility of disarmament and peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula, where the level of armament is gradually becoming more advanced due to North Korea's nuclear program and THAAD, even after 70 years since the armistice agreement.

North Korea responded to the changes in international relations brought about by the discourse on peace, such as the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' and the 'Theory of Peaceful Coexistence', and declared that it would use the reduction in defense spending due to the reduction of 80,000 Korean People's Army troops to build peace and improve the people's lives. The reason North Korea was able to attempt a reduction of 20% of its total troops in 1956 was because 250,000 Chinese People's Volunteer Army troops still remained in North Korea, since, considering North Korea's economic power and population level, maintaining a standing army of over 400,000 was a great burden on the North Korean economy, which was pursuing postwar recovery and industrialization. North Korea actually saw the effect of appropriately deploying discharged soldiers to industrial sites, thereby supplementing the labor force that was lacking in postwar reconstruction.

North Korea's troop reduction and disarmament were also preemptive measures to pressure South Korea to reduce its troop and start disarmament. South Korea dismissed theories about peaceful coexistence between the socialist bloc and the Third World, and North Korea's troop reduction as a mere 'peace offensive' and disparaged it as change at the tactical level, but it could not ignore the peace discussions on arms control, such as the 'peaceful use of nuclear energy' led by the US. Nevertheless, the South Korean government and media were wary of the 'two-camp peace offensive' and insisted on South Korea's introduction of nuclear weapons and 'weapons modernization' based on the 'fact' that North Korea had already introduced nuclear weapons. However, maintaining military power that surpassed economic power was a great

burden for South Korea, even more than North Korea, and since even aid from the US was decreasing, the reduction of the South Korean troop was an inevitable choice for the South Korean government's 'sound economy.'

The disarmament between South and North Korea in the late 1950s on the Korean Peninsula was carried out while exaggerating the level of the other side's military power and defining themselves as a 'peace force'. It was also clearly influenced by the international trend of 'peaceful coexistence', but it had something in common in that it adjusted the level of military power that had grown large after the war with the goal of postwar recovery and 'financial soundness'.

However, disarmament did not necessarily mean peace. The disarmament between South and North Korea in the late 1950s did not lead to peace settlement and easing of tensions. More important than the statement of peace is the specific discussion of what constitutes peace, and in order to realize this, there is no choice but to continue serious dialogue while respecting each other. However, after the disarmament between South and North Korea in the late 1950s, the South and North Korean governments and the Military Armistice Commission failed to play that role, and it took a much longer period of hardship for inter-Korean relations to progress.