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Barnes, Robert ORCID logoORCID:
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5064-7839> (2020) Review: Jun Suk Hyun and William Stueck. "The U.S.–ROK Relationship into Full Bloom: From 'Little Strategic Interest' to Alliance Partner, 1947–1966". *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 26:2 (2019): 103-140. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02602002>. *H-Diplo* (962).

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Jun Suk Hyun and William Stueck. “The U.S.–ROK Relationship into Full Bloom: From ‘Little Strategic Interest’ to Alliance Partner, 1947–1966”. *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 26:2 (2019): 103-140. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02602002>.

Reviewed by **Robert Barnes**, York St John University

This article is written by one of the most prolific and influential historians of the Korean War, William Stueck, and Jun Suk Hyun, an independent scholar and presumably Stueck’s former Ph.D. student. The two authors meticulously outline the evolution of relations between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) from before the creation of the latter state – going as far back as US wartime planning for the peninsula but concentrating on events from 1947 onwards – to the deployment of South Korean forces in the Vietnam War. Hyun and Stueck argue convincingly that despite inherent tensions throughout this period, especially between American officials and Syngman Rhee, the prickly authoritarian first President of the ROK, as well as general-turned-politician Pak Chōng-hūi, this relationship was transformed from a begrudging post-war commitment on the part of the United States to the ROK becoming the Western superpower’s most reliable strategic partner in East Asia. At the heart of this relationship were “the overlapping of interests between the two nations” (136), particularly Seoul’s determined anti-communism and need for the alliance for its survival and Washington’s lack of alternatives, notably Japan, as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) increasingly became perceived as the main threat in the Asia-Pacific region.

Hyun and Stueck trace the durability, as well as the discontinuity, of U.S.-ROK relations through a largely chronological account, highlighting the key events – with the end of the Korean War in 1953 being the most significant although not the only important turning point – that indicated, “a resilience and flexibility on both sides that constituted a significant reduction in the asymmetry of the relationship” (104). Moreover, the authors utilise effectively three categories of analysis that they term “the strategic, the general psychological, and the bilateral psychological” (105). While the first category needs little explanation, Hyun and Stueck define the second category as the impact of US policies in Korea on Washington’s global Cold War credibility. These issues are evidently crucial but are generally well known. It is the category of bilateral psychology, defined as “the evolving state of mind of Americans and South Koreans toward each other” (105), that is the most interesting theme addressed in this article.

Furthermore, in terms of research, Hyun and Stueck engage with an impressive range of primary material. Given that this is an international history topic it is methodologically unsurprising that the authors focus on utilising official U.S. government documents, especially State Department, National Security Council and Joint Chiefs of Staff records, as well as private papers collections. While there is a tendency to over-rely on the edited *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, this research has been sufficiently supplemented by records from National Archives II, the Digital National Security Archives, the *Department of State Bulletin*, the George C. Marshall Library, the UN Archives, and the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library. It is unclear why, though, no research appears to have been conducted at the other pertinent Presidential libraries. Still, the authors also make some good use of digital records from the Syngman Rhee Institute, Yonsei University, helping to shed greater light on South Korean perspectives. Similarly, Hyun and Stueck reference most of the key books, articles, and Ph.D. theses relating to this topic although I have noted below several other works that they appear to have overlooked. In addition, the authors could have engaged more in the main text with the arguments presented by other historians – particularly Stephen Jin-Woo Lee and Donald MacDonald whose books cover similar periods and themes¹ – to further emphasise their contribution to the historiographical debate on the topic. Instead, they leave analysis of the historiography largely to the footnotes which is less engaging.

¹ Stephen Jin-Woo Lee, *Master of Manipulation: Syngman Rhee and the Seoul-Washington Alliance 1953–1960* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2001); Donald Macdonald, *U.S.-Korean Relations from Liberation to Self-Reliance: The Twenty-Year Record* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

Regarding the specific content, this article is lucidly and engagingly written as one continuous piece of prose although use of subheadings may have helped break up the narrative into clearly defined periods. Nevertheless, the first section evidently focuses on events between the United States first taking an interest in Korea in 1943 to the outbreak of the Korean War. Here the authors emphasise the muddled nature of US strategic thinking towards Korea – shifting between being of “little strategic interest” (104) to territory that had to be kept out of Soviet hands – in light of the difficulties encountered during the occupation of the area south of the 38th parallel and the simultaneous emergence of the Cold War. Yet these events are covered in detail in histories of the origins of the Korean War, including those by William Stueck, James Matray, and Allen Millett that are noted in the footnotes.² I am surprised, though, that no reference is made of Bruce Cumings’ and Peter Lowe’s seminal, if now dated, works on this topic.³ Still, the authors do place greater emphasis than other historians on the partial improvement in relations after the creation of the ROK as Rhee instituted limited land reform and countered the guerrilla insurgency while Washington provided increased economic and military assistance. It is also welcome to see credit being given to the often-overlooked endeavours of the U.S. Ambassador to the ROK, John Muccio, interviewed by Stueck in 1973, whom the authors describe as “a patient diplomat who genuinely liked Koreans” (110).

In the next section on the Korean War years Hyun and Stueck recount the domestic and international factors leading to the swift and strong U.S. response to the North Korean invasion on 25 June 1950. They then discuss how the war years, despite continuing tensions with Rhee, led to the creation of what South Koreans still refer to as an “alliance forged in blood” (112). But, again, this period is well known and this section bears considerable resemblance to another article written by Stueck with Boram Yi.⁴ However, with regards to the “bilateral psychology” theme, the reference to Paek Sŏn-yŏp, “South Korea’s most distinguished military leader during the Korean War” (111), helped demonstrate how U.S.-ROK relations evolved at a more personal level. Hyun and Stueck also correctly stress the critical sacrifices made by South Koreans in the fighting where “ROK servicemen suffered over four times the casualties of their American counterparts” (112). They especially emphasise, in spite of its poor performance earlier in the war, that by the final stages of the war “ROK army units manned seventy percent of the front line against Communist forces and had earned the respect and confidence of American military leaders” (112). For the authors this marked an important turning point since Washington had begun, although very tentatively, to believe that South Koreans could defend their own territory and the US burden could be reduced.

Hyun and Stueck in the following section give a solid but brief account of the armistice negotiations, basing this on what in footnote 25 they describe as Rosemary Foot’s “standard work” (113) of the talks,⁵ before moving on to look at the aftermath of the war and the Korean phase of the 1954 Geneva Conference.⁶ This section includes much useful information regarding Washington’s preferred option

² James Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941–1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985); Allan Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence: Regents of Kansas Press, 2005); William Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy toward China and Korea, 1947–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

³ Bruce Cumings, *Origins of the Korean War, Volume I: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Volume II: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Peter Lowe, *The Origins of the Korean War* (London: Longman, 1986).

⁴ William Stueck and Boram Yi, “An Alliance Forged in Blood’: The American Occupation of Korea, the Korean War, and the U.S.-South Korean Alliance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33:2 (2010): 177–209. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402391003590200>.

⁵ Rosemary Foot, *A Substitute for Victory: The Politics of Peacemaking at the Korean Armistice Talks* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁶ It is surprising that key works on this period have not been referenced, such as, Sydney Bailey, *The Korean Armistice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992); Henry Brands, “The Dwight D. Eisenhower administration, Syngman Rhee and the ‘other’ Geneva conference of 1954”, *Pacific Historical Review* 56:1 (1987), 59–85. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3638826>; Matsuda Haruka, “A clash of empires in East Asia: The Geneva conference on

of defending the ROK in the future through a “Greater Sanctions Statement” (113) with the other UN members contributing forces. This strategy chimed with American principles of collective security; it kept open the option of seeking the unification of Korea under the ROK based on the peninsula’s complete neutrality; and would deter any attempt by Rhee to seek forceful unification. However, Hyun and Stueck stress that the incoming Eisenhower administration grudgingly accepted a bilateral defence agreement – as well as a massive economic aid package – with Rhee since under the ‘New Look’ defence strategy the United States “could extend its defense commitment to areas located beyond what Acheson called in 1950 the U.S. ‘defensive perimeter,’ such as Indochina, the Taiwan Strait, and Korea, without overstretching U.S. resources” (115). Hyun and Stueck stipulate that this treaty was “a sign that some reciprocity existed in the relationship” (116) and represented the first tentative step in the incorporation of the ROK into the United States’ strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. Yet the Korean phase of the Geneva Conference demonstrated that Washington still faced considerable problems balancing its commitment to its other Cold War allies with managing a Rhee determined to launch an offensive north with US backing.

The authors develop these themes in greater detail when focusing on the solidification of the U.S.-ROK relationship between the Geneva Conference and Rhee’s demise in 1960. This is the most in-depth section representing the most original contribution to historical knowledge made by this article and is evidently based on Hyun’s unpublished PhD thesis.⁷ The authors start with an account of Rhee’s eventful visit to Washington in July 1954 during which the ROK president used passionate public calls for a military initiative to negotiate an “‘Agreed Minute’...which included an aid package of up to \$700 million for fiscal 1954 and ROK armed forces totaling 720,000 personnel, but also endorsed using peaceful means to achieve Korean unification” (121). Hyun and Stueck stress that this agreement led to diminished U.S. anxieties regarding Korean security despite strains between U.S. economic administrators and their South Korean hosts due to the perceived “father knows best” (122) attitude of the former. Still, it was clear to both parties that strategically “the United States and South Korea needed each other” (122), especially as the Cold War in East Asia intensified and the staunchly anti-Communist regime in Seoul appeared willing to play a much more active role than Japan. As such, when in 1955 it became evident that Communist forces were being reinforced in North Korea while, at the same time, UN forces were withdrawing and the United States sought to reduce their own forces for financial and strategic reasons, the Eisenhower administration unilaterally abrogated articles 13c and 13d of the armistice agreement. Washington also issued a warning – despite British and Japanese opposition – that it would respond with nuclear attacks on the DPRK and PRC if the ROK was invaded. The centrality of the ROK in US strategic thinking was then demonstrated when in the late 1950s the UN Command moved its headquarters from Tokyo to Seoul; nuclear weapons were placed for the first time in the ROK; and the creation of “pentomic” (128) US army divisions in Korea equipped with atomic artillery and ground-to-ground missiles. However, behind American thinking lay the desire to convince Rhee to reduce his own forces before he was tempted to use them offensively and to reduce U.S. aid to the ROK which amounted to “some \$800 million annually, the highest outlay for any country in the world” (127). Nevertheless, the authors clearly demonstrate here that, due to what John Lewis Gaddis has described as the adaptability of American political culture to international politics,⁸ “by the late 1950s the U.S.-ROK alliance...had become a major fixture in American strategy in the Western Pacific” (130).

Korea, 1954”, *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 20:2 (2007), 193-211; Jong-Yil Ra, “The politics of conference: The political conference on Korea in Geneva, 16 April-25 June 1954”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 34:3 (1999), 399-416; Walter Hermes, *Truce Tent and Fighting Front: The United States Army in the Korean War* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1966); C. Turner Joy, *Negotiating While Fighting: Diary of Admiral C. Turner Joy at the Korean Armistice Conference* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977); William Vatcher, *Panmunjom: The Story of the Korean Military Armistice Negotiations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1958).

⁷ Jun Suk Hyun, “Behind the Storm: The Evolution of U.S. Defense Policy toward Korea, 1953–1957,” unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Georgia, 2015.

⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997), 198–203.

The final relatively brief section – given the authors describe it as culminating in the “peak of the alliance” (134) – examines the period after Rhee was toppled from power following popular protests in 1960 only for the military, led by Major General Pak Chŏng-hŭi, to seize power a year later. Hyun and Stueck state that despite these undemocratic developments and Pak’s limited pro-American sentiment, the South Korean military dictator sought to redress issues that had continued to cause discontent between Washington and Seoul. Pak swiftly developed strategies to achieve rapid economic progress and end dependency on US aid. He wanted to end infringements of civil liberties by releasing political prisoners and promising a return to civilian rule within two years. Pak also sought to negotiate a settlement with Japan. In particular, the Kennedy administration was impressed by Pak’s “stout anti-communism” and offer to send troops to Vietnam as a contribution “to the security of the Far East” (133). Nonetheless, Hyun and Stueck note that “the U.S. relationship with Pak was never intimate” (134) since the South Korean leader often pursued economic policies against U.S. advice, brutally suppressed internal dissent, and threatened to renege on his promise to hold elections in 1963. Yet most of these issues were overlooked once Pak had been narrowly elected President of the ROK and the South Korean economy was booming. The article ends with U.S.-ROK alliance coming to full fruition in 1965-6 when Seoul sent two divisions to fight in Vietnam – eventually contributing over 300,000 troops, more than any other U.S. ally – while Washington concluded its first Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the ROK. Hyun and Stueck thus rightly conclude that by the mid-1960 the U.S.-ROK alliance had moved towards “a bilateral relationship of greater if not total mutuality... a pattern that continues to the present as an essential feature of the enduring alliance” (136).

Autobiographical Sketch of the Reviewer

Dr Robert Barnes is a Senior Lecturer in History at York St John University. He received his Ph.D. in International History from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2011. He published his first monograph with I.B. Tauris in 2014 titled, *The US, the UN and the Korean War: Communism in the Far East and the American Struggle for Hegemony in the Cold War*. He has also published articles in the *Journal of Korean Studies*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, and *RUSI Journal*, as well as written chapters in edited collections, relating to the Korean War. Dr Barnes’ broader research interests lie in the history of the Cold War and he is currently working on a monograph examining Commonwealth strategic relations between 1945 and 1957. From this research he published an article in 2019 in the *International History Review*.