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The Birth of Korea–United States Relations

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Abstract

In the United States, Korea is remembered primarily through the Korean War (1950-1953) and, more recently, seen in the context of the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, how did the U.S. meet Korea for the first time before the Korean War? How did the U.S. establish diplomatic relations with Korea under the isolationist policy of the Joseon dynasty? How did the American public view Korea and its citizens during the birth of their relations? This paper explains the origins of relations between Korea and the U.S. as well as the role of the U.S. in shaipng bilateral relations with Korea before, during, and after the Japanese colonialism in Korea as well as during the Korean War. This study investigates primary sources of treaties between the two countries and secondary literature on the U.S.'s strategic calculations regarding the Korean Peninsula. It presents an interpretive and documentary analysis, relying on various historical documents that cover important military and geopolitical events from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries. The initial encounter between the two countries can be traced back to the Korea-U.S. conflict in 1871, which resulted in an unequal agreement through the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. It demonstrates how the 1882 Treaty superficially emphasized friendship while actually imposing unequal relations, and how the U.S. sanctioned Japan's domination of Korea through the 1905 Portsmouth Treaty and the Taft-Katsura Agreement. Unlike the peace and amity between the two countries that the treaty called for, the U.S. made a secret agreement with Japan at the end of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 to let Japan colonize Korea through the Treaty of Portsmouth of 1905. South Korea and the U.S. did not have a strong alliance until they

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established their collective defense system through the Mutual Defense Treaty at the end of the Korean War.

Keywords
Diplomatic relations between Korea and United States, Korea-U.S. War of 1871, 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth.

Introduction

In the United States (U.S.), Korea has been remembered primarily through the Korean War (1950-1953) and, more recently, in the context of the North Korean nuclear crisis. The U.S. Department of Defense presents the significant lesson, “freedom is not free,” engraved on the wall near the Pool of Remembrance at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. (U.S. Department of Defense n.d.). The Mural Wall, the primary feature of the Memorial, honors the millions of Americans who served in the Korean War (U.S. Department of Defense n.d.). On July 27, 2022, the Memorial was rededicated with a new “Wall of Remembrance” that “features the names of the more than 43,000 U.S. service members and Korean augmentees to the U.S. Army who were killed during the war” (Lopez 2022). This Memorial is one of the 137 monuments in the U.S. and one of the 219 monuments worldwide outside Korea that commemorate the Korean War (Gukgabohuncheo 2010; United Nations Peace Memorial Hall n.d.).[1] But how did the U.S. and Korea first engage politically long before the Korean War? How did the U.S. establish diplomatic relations with Korea under the isolationist policy of the Joseon dynasty? How did the American public view Korea and its citizens during the birth of their relations? This paper explains the origins of relations between Korea and the U.S., as well as the role of the U.S. in bilateral relations with Korea before and after the first diplomatic treaty between the two countries, including the period of Japanese colonialism in Korea and the Korean War.

1) Massachusetts has the most 16 monuments in the U.S., followed by New York with 11 and California and Minnesota with 8.

Conventional Interpretations vs. Revisionist Perspectives

Earlier scholarship on the U.S. involvement in Korea portrays the Korea-U.S. relationship as amicable and mutually beneficial, driven by the U.S.'s altruistic mission and modernization ideals for the East. This traditional scholarship is often U.S.-centric and downplays U.S. imperialism and Korean agency. Instead, it emphasizes the U.S.'s neutral, benevolent or enlightened power without colonizing intentions, which sets the U.S. apart from Japan or other European forces. These earlier works implicitly justify the U.S. involvement in Korea. A foundational American account of Korea revealed Western perspectives and biases, describing Korea as backward, passive, and exotic, while also reflecting the missionary and civilizational logic of the era (Griffis 1882). Characterized by a tone of cultural superiority, George W. Gilmore (1892) and Homer B. Hulbert (1906) present an American missionary's account of Korean society and politics, promoting Christianity and Western education as means to advance Korea.

Revisionist perspectives critique the U.S.'s imperial motives and role in establishing asymmetrical relations with Korea. Bruce Cumings (2005) dismantles heroic portrayals of U.S. diplomacy and reinterprets American involvement in Korea. He argues that the first treaty between Korea and the U.S. in 1882 was not that different from other unequal treaties that the U.S. signed in Asia, mirroring American strategic calculations based on American imperial expansionism.

To examine the origin of the bilateral relation between Korea and the U.S., this study provides critical reappraisals of these two contrasting approaches by investigating interactions between the Joseon dynasty and the

U.S. shortly before and after the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. It presents an interpretive and documentary analysis, relying on various historical primary and secondary documents that cover important military and geopolitical events from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries. In doing so, this study aims to correct the stereotypical image of the diplomatic relations between the two countries, which have been established and consolidated since World War II, particularly following the Korean War.

Joseon's Isolationism

The term "Hermit Kingdom" was coined by an American minister William Elliot Griffis in his 1882 book *Corea, The Hermit Nation*. This term was used to describe the Joseon dynasty's (1392-1910) period of isolation. The Korean Peninsula suffered from invasions by the Mongols, Japanese, and Manchus. Particularly, the six invasions by the Mongols under the Goryeo (고려) dynasty (918-1392) and the two Japanese invasions under the Joseon dynasty in 1592 and 1598 left a long-lasting impact on Joseon's foreign policy (Griffis 1882). These wars fostered a strong preference for avoiding foreign invasions, leading the Joseon dynasty to implement an isolationist policy to prevent future invasions and safeguard national security.

In addition to the 400 years of invasions experienced on the Korean Peninsula, diplomatic factors also sparked Joseon's isolation. Joseon "maintain[ed] a tributary, or divergent relationship with the Qing dynasty in China" (Coleman 1990: 31), embedded in realpolitik as a method in international relations focusing on power-driven results rather than ideological or moral considerations (Haslam 2014).[2] Joseon believed that by

2) Joseon's isolationism was different from Japan's national seclusion (*sakoku*) which pushed

maintaining good relations with China, China would help defend Joseon against foreign invasion, particularly from neighboring powers. As a result, Joseon did not actively seek to establish diplomatic and trade relations with Western countries, deeming such contacts unnecessary. Instead, the focus was on preserving internal stability and maintaining good relations with China to ensure the dynasty's security and sovereignty.

In addition, a dramatic change in religious and political beliefs among the highly educated ruling class scholar-officials, known in Korean as the *sadaebu* (사대부), between the end of the Goryeo dynasty and the start of the Joseon dynasty marked a significant move toward isolationism (Baker 2008: 53). By the time Joseon dynasty "adopted Neo-Confucianism as the state orthodoxy and relegated other belief systems to secondary positions… Buddhism lost its domination over Korean religious life" (Lew 2013: 15). Joseon dynasty rulers believed that preserving a strict hierarchical system and focusing on internal governance was essential for meeting the needs of the people and maintaining the nation. Consequently, they viewed diplomatic relations with the West as potentially introducing dangerous ideas that could threaten the established hierarchical system. As Neo-Confucian values and ideals enforced isolationism under the Joseon dynasty, the late nineteenth century encountered new challenges when Western powers emerged in East Asia, exemplified in the Korea-U.S. War of 1871.

Japan away from tributary relations with China. Japan's seclusion was the Tokugawa shogunate's foreign policy in 1639-1854, prohibiting anyone from traveling in and out of Japan only except for the Dutch, Chinese, and Koreans with access permit to Japan through a designated port (Mizuno 2009: 189).

The Korea-U.S. War of 1871

A battle between Korean and American military forces in 1871 during an American expedition is widely taught and known in Korea as the *Shin-mi Yang-yo* (신미양요), meaning the 1871 barbarian incursion. However, this war was unknown to the American public. The Korean War of 1950-1953 "overshadows" this earlier war even though American historians and journalists claimed this war was a "pivotal event in nineteenth-century U.S.-East Asian relations" (Chang 2003: 1332). Gordon H. Chang contrasts the two wars as such: "For Americans today, the 1871 clash recalls a decidedly unpleasant period in U.S.-East Asian relations, Korean relations in particular, whereas the story of mid-twentieth century American sacrifices in Korea in the common battle against Communism is a far more congenial story (Chang 2003: 1333). The Korean War "dominates American popular and scholarly understanding of all modern Korean history, obscuring what came before" (Chang 2003: 1333). Both wars demonstrate the importance of U.S. intervention through historical events in understanding contemporary contexts and geopolitical ideology in modern day Korea. Although the 1871 war was a vital moment in the Korea-U.S. alliance, it remains as forgotten as the Cold War overshadows pre-World War II events.

Even though the official interest of the U.S. in developing formal relations with the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) dates from the 1840s, the U.S. initiated its purposeful plan for Korea when the expansionist Secretary of State, William H. Seward, appointed by the U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, sought to open Korea to American commercial interests. However, during Seward's tenure (1861-1869), the only American contact with Korea was limited to unofficial encounters, including the experiences of two private vessels, the *Surprise* and the *General Sherman*, under American flags

venturing into Korean waters in 1866 (Chang 2003).

East Asian countries were not interested in developing relations with Westerners as they had formed their regional system based on Confucian norms (Chang 2003). As a result, Seward's efforts failed. His successor, Hamilton Fish, proceeded to Korea with a naval expedition in the spring of 1870. The primary purpose of the expedition was to negotiate a treaty that ensured the protection of shipwrecked American seamen under Washington's humanitarian concerns. In 1871, the American flotilla included "five armed warships carrying 85 cannons and 1,230 marines and sailors" (Chang 2003: 1338). It was the first time that American ground forces raised the American flag in Asia, "initiating a long and traumatic tradition of American military involvement there" (Chang 2003: 1334). The United States deployed this extensive military force to direct Joseon away from its isolation policy and open its door to the West.

The *General Sherman* incident in 1866 and the American expedition were critical events in the early history of Korea-U.S. relations. These two historical events helped shape the political landscape between the two countries. The *General Sherman* incident was Korea's first encounter with the U.S. In 1866, Americans on the merchant ship *SS General Sherman* arrived in Joseon and demanded that Koreans trade with them. In response, Koreans burned down the ship and killed the crew members on board (Johnson 2011: 114). Following this incident, the U.S. needed to investigate what happened to the crew of *SS General Sherman* and aimed to establish a trade treaty with the "Hermit Kingdom."

Consequently, following the failed expedition to Korea in 1871, the U.S. returned to Joseon with warships and soldiers, demanded reparations in the aftermath the *General Sherman* incident, and insisted that Korea abandon its isolation policy and open its door to the U.S. On June 10, 1871, the U.S. attacked Joseon with 22 vessels with 950 soldiers (Chang 2003: 1352). By

the end of the battle on June 11, 1871, the Americans counted about 250 Korean casualties, with three dead and nine injured American soldiers (Chang 2003: 1366).

Amerians saw the expedition to Joseon in 1871 by describing the citizens of Joseon as “bloodthirsty and vicious, with little regard for human life··· savages opposed to progress and intercourse with the civilized world” (Johnson 2011: 119). However, Joseon believed that this expedition posed a direct threat to both the hierarchy and its sovereignty, and believed that the Westerners were attempting to steal treasures from the tombs of former kings and queens, primarily seeking for gold, jade, and jewels (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs 2017). The forceful actions taken by the U.S. and other Western countries to impose diplomatic measures, such as unequal treaties and restrictions on foreign trade against Joseon’s wishes, increased Koreans’ hostility toward the West.

The 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation

Despite earlier U.S. efforts to establish diplomatic relations with Korea, it was not until 1882 that the U.S. forced Korea to sign the Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, also known as the Shufeldt Treaty. This treaty opened Joseon to its first diplomatic relations with the U.S. (Johnson 2011: 120), marking Korea’s first treaty signed with a Western power, and initiating diplomatic and commercial ties.

The U.S. signed the Treaty on February 13, 1882, and Joseon signed it on May 18, 1882. The Treaty was enacted on the following day. The treaty documents comprise 14 articles and can be categorized into three categories

- diplomacy, commerce, and navigation (Joseon-U.S. Treaty 1882).

Eight articles-Articles 1, 2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, and 14-established diplomatic relations between the two countries. Article 1 envisions friendship between the two governments and people, stating, “There shall be perpetual peace and friendship between the President of the United States and the King of [Joseon] and the citizens and subjects of their respective Governments.” Article 2 notes the appointment of officials, including the Diplomatic Representatives residing at the Court of the other party and Consular Representatives at the other’s ports, as well as their rights and immunities.

Article 4 confirms extraterritoriality between the two countries. It recognizes the rights of American citizens and ensures the protection of local authorities over their dwellings and property. Citizens and subjects of the two countries shall be punished only by their authorities according to the laws of each party, meaning that any U.S. citizens living in Joseon shall be protected by the U.S. government and subjects of Joseon shall be punished by the Joseon authorities (exterritorial rights/jurisdiction). It states that “citizens of the United States, either on shore or in any merchant-vessel, who may insult, trouble or wound the persons, or injure the property of the people of [Joseon], shall be arrested and punished only by the consul or other public functionary of the United States, thereto authorized, according to the laws of the United States.”

Article 6 ensures that citizens of Joseon and the U.S. are granted the right to “reside and rent premises, purchase land, or to construct residences or warehouses in all parts of the country,” as residents are under the protection of their respective governments. It reiterates that any coercion or intimidation shall not be permitted in the process of acquisition of land or buildings.

Article 14 specifies the Most-Favored-Nation (MFN) clause, stating that “should at any time the King of [Joseon] grant to any nation...any right,

privilege or favor..., such right, privilege and favor shall freely inure to the benefit of the United States." Due to the Prince Regent's policy of isolationism (Johnson 2013: 119), this clause makes it highly difficult for the treaty to be accepted by Joseon.

Articles 7, 8, and 9 establish the framework of commerce between the two countries. Article 7 emphasizes the "absolute prohibition" of opium in any of the ports of the two countries, prohibiting the import and export of opium in both Joseon and US ports. Article 8 temporarily prohibits the export of breadstuffs and red ginseng, and Article 9 regulates the export of weapons or ammunition of war. It states that "cannon, small arms, swords, gunpowder, shot and all munitions of war" can be purchased only by officials of the Joseon government and "may be imported by citizens of the United States only under a written permit from the authorities" of Joseon.

Articles 3 and 5 establish navigation between the two countries. Article 3 stipulates that if a U.S. ship cannot reach the closest port in Joseon, it can enter any port or harbor (in certain circumstances). Additionally, locals must assist in salvaging the ship and its cargo if it is wrecked. Article 5 provides that any merchant and their ships visiting the U.S. and Joseon shall be paying their duties according to the Customs Regulations of the U.S. and Joseon.

The Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation had several significant implications. Firstly, it opened Joseon up to the West after many centuries of isolationism, mainly due to Prince Regent Heungseon, whose isolationist policy had blocked many diplomatic relations with other countries. Secondly, the American and Korean public's responses to the treaty were different. A *New York Times* article, published on July 7, 1882, titled "The Treaty of Corea," says that the treaty was "a wonderful finale to a long, discouraging, and costly series of attempts to bring Corea into

friendly relations with other portions of the civilized world" (*The New York Times* 1882). The U.S. saw this treaty as friendly. However, to the government of Joseon, this was interpreted as an unequal agreement (Krishnan 1984: 4) as the treaty violated the isolation policy and implicated the U.S. in its enforcement that the U.S. was seen as a better and superior country. Horace Allen, a renowned missionary and former ambassador to Korea, wrote in his editorial, "Corea is altogether different. It is one of those immovable Asiatic kingdoms which has until now hated foreigners and resisted all efforts made to trade with it" (Allen 1889). Allen believed that Korea was not a country that could change with modern times unless it was subjected to treaties.

Exchanges between Joseon and the U.S.

Following the 1882 Treaty, diplomatic relations between Joseon and the U.S. began in May with the establishment of the U.S. legation (a diplomatic liaison office) in Jeongdong, Seoul, and the appointment of the first U.S. diplomatic envoy, Lucius H. Foote (Old Korean Legation n.d.). According to the U.S. National Museum of American Diplomacy (n.d.), *legation* is defined as a "diplomatic mission in a foreign country headed by a diplomat with the rank of minister." For example, full diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Japan were established in 1859 after the 1854 Treaty of Peace and Amity, following Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival in Japan in 1853. In 1859, a U.S. legation was established in Japan and remained open until 1906, when the U.S. government opened a full embassy.

The Legation Korea sent its Special Mission of Friendship to the U.S. or *Bobingsa* (보빙사) by the King of Joseon as its first diplomatic mission to the U.S. in July 1883 (Walter 1969). This official Korean delegation

comprised ten members, including the Chief Minister, Yeong-ik Min, and the Vice Minister, Yeong-sik Hong (Boston University School of Theology n.d.). Percival Lawrence Lowell (1885-1916), an American businessman, mathematician, and astronomer traveling through the Far East and staying in Japan for two months, worked as the delegation's foreign secretary and translator (Lowell 1888). Four years later, in 1887, Chung Yang Park was appointed as the first Korean Minister to the U.S. He and his staff arrived in the U.S. on January 1, 1888, and visited President Cleveland at the White House on January 17, where they presented their credentials from King Gojong. The first Korean Legation office was established at Fisher House, near the White House, on January 19, 1888. The Korean Legation was relocated to the present building on February 13, 1889 (Old Korean Legation n.d.), and the *Washington Times* (1910) reported the sale of the Korean Empire Legation building by the Japanese on September 3, 1910, after Imperial Japan deprived the Korean Empire of its sovereignty through the Korea-Japan Treaty of 1910.

In addition to the establishment of the diplomatic channels, the American missionaries came to Joseon to introduce Western beliefs (e.g., philosophy and religion), schools, and medicine throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ryu 2001). They were the first Westerners to live in Joseon after the adoption of the treaty, which significantly changed Korean society. Missionaries involved in medicine, such as Dr. Horace Allen, founded the first Western hospital, known as *Chejungwon* (literally meaning "House of Universal Helpfulness") (Yeo & Yoon 2017: 685). Missionaries were also involved in education, establishing many schools, including Yonsei University and Ewha Womans University. The latter was founded by Mary F. Scranton in 1886 and was named "Ewha," meaning "bestowed by Emperor Kojong" (Ewha Womans University, n.d.). This name emphasized the importance of knowledge, encompassing subjects such as science and the liberal arts. Moreover, their influence opened Korean society to reform and

inspired early Korean independence movements. They encouraged Western thoughts of democracy, human rights, and self-determination, helping plant the seeds for Korea's struggles for independence from Japanese colonial rule. In fact, in the 1920s, Korean Christian nationalists adopted both capitalist economic ethics and social transformation ethics driven by the social gospel (Kim 2017).

Treaty of Portsmouth

The 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth was a crucial agreement that nullified the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. The Treaty of Portsmouth, signed on September 5, 1905, was an agreement between Japan and Russia that ended the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Brokered in a party by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, the negotiations took place in August in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, because it was "cooler than Washington during the hot summer" (Kowner 2006: 424). The treaty marked the emergence of Japan as a significant world power. It also highlighted the importance of U.S. political influence in international relations, contributing to Roosevelt being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. The final agreement "affirmed the Japanese presence in south Manchuria and Korea and ceded the southern half of the island of Sakhalin to Japan" (U.S. Office of the Historian n.d.).

This treaty comprises 15 articles and can be categorized into two themes: geopolitics and diplomacy. Articles 3 through 9, 11, and 12 address the geopolitical relations between the two countries. Article 3 ensures that Japan and Russia will withdraw from Manchuria, except for the Liaodong Peninsula, and return it to China. Article 4 stipulates that Japan and Russia will not obstruct China's general measures for developing commerce or

industry in Manchuria. Article 5 requires Russia to lease Port Arthur, Talien, and adjacent territories and territorial waters to Japan, along with associated rights and privileges, with the consent of the Chinese Government. Article 6 mandates that Russia yield to Japan the Chan-chun (Kawan-Chien-Tsi) and Port Arthur Railroad, without compensation and with the consent of China, along with the coal mines in that region belonging to this railroad. Article 7 stipulates that Japan and Russia shall untilize the railroads in Manchuria for commercial and industrial purposes but shall not interfere with the railroads in the Liaodong Peninsula. Article 8 promotes and facilitates the establishment of a separate convention to regulate a connecting railroad services in Manchuria. Article 9 stipulates that Russia cedes to Japan, in perpetuity and with full sovereignty, the southern part of Sakhalin Island and other adjacent islands. Both parties agree not to take military action that may impede free navigation. Article 11 states that Japanese citizens are granted fishing rights in the East Sea (Sea of Japan), the Okhotsk Sea, and the Bering Sea. Article 12 stipulates that if the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation is "annulled," Japan and Russia will enter into a new treaty of commerce and navigation based on pre-war agreements, thereby upholding the principle of the Most-Favored-Nation clause.

Articles 1, 2, 10, 13, and 14 establish diplomatic relations between the two countries. Article 1 establishes peace and friendship between Japan and Russia. Article 10 establishes that Russian citizens can sell their property in their own country or, if staying in Japan, their property rights will be subject to Japanese laws and jurisdiction. Article 13 states that all prisoners of war will be returned to their respective governments, which will cover the costs of injuries inflicted. Article 14 states that the treaty shall be ratified by the Emperor of Japan and Russia and will come into full force upon ratification.

Article 2 deserves closer attention in the context of the Korea-U.S.

relations. Article 2 of the Treaty of Portsmouth reads as follows:

> The Imperial Government of Russia, recognizing that Japan has predominant political, military, and economic interests in Korea, agrees not to interfere or place obstacles in the way of any measure of direction, protection, and supervision which the Imperial Government of Japan may deem necessary to adopt in Korea.
>
> It is agreed that Russian subjects in Korea shall be treated in exactly the same manner as the citizens of other foreign countries; that is, that they shall be placed on the same footing as the citizens of the most-favored nation.
>
> It is likewise agreed that, in order to avoid any cause of misunderstanding, the two high contracting parties shall refrain from adopting, on the Russo-Korean frontier, any military measures which might menace the security of the Russian or Korean territory.

Article 2 notes that Russia must acknowledge Japan's political, military, and economic interests in Korea, with no interference from Russia. Purposefully ignoring Article 1 of the 1882 treaty stating that there will be peace between the two countries and their citizens, the Taft-Katsura agreement clarifies that the U.S. and Japan agreed that “Korea being the direct cause of our war with Russia, ···Japan feels absolutely constrained to take some definite step with a view to precluding the possibility of Korea falling back into her former condition” (Taft-Katsura Agreement 1905). Following this agreement, the Treaty of Portsmouth paved the way for Japan’s colonization of Korea, as Japan held Korea responsible for causing the Russo-Japanese War. This led to Korea being forced to sign the Korea-Japan Annexation Treaty on August 22, 1910. The Treaty of Portsmouth also set the U.S. interests in the Korean Peninsula against Korean interests on the issues of national independence under the three administrations: Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), William H. Taft (1909-1913), and Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921). Two months before the Treaty of Portsmouth was signed, a secret agreement was reached between

former U.S. Secretary of War William H. Taft, who served under the Roosevelt administration, and Japanese Foreign Minister Katsura Taro, known as the Taft-Katsura agreement. In this secret agreement, “the U.S. agreed to concede any interest in Korea in exchange for Japan recognizing a U.S. sphere of influence in the Philippines” (Cha and Pardo 2023: 7-8). To Koreans, this agreement was seen as a betrayal by the U.S. Even though President Roosevelt received a Nobel Peace Prize “for having negotiated peace in the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-1905” (The Nobel Prize n.d.), for Koreans, he won the Prize for selling out Korea to Japan···in return for a U.S. sphere of influence over the Philippines” (Cha and Pardo 2023: 2).

In addition to the “betrayal” by the U.S. through these two agreements, Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points is worth noting. In his Fourteen Points, he envisioned that “national self-determination [is] for all people” (Cha & Pardo 2023: 16). The principle of “self-determination” ignited Korea’s March 1st independence movement because Koreans believed that it provided them with a good chance to regain their country from Japan. However, self-determination was a “political strategy···to scramble the already occupied territories to secure for themselves···in the name of “national interests” (Chen 2010: 82). Wilson applied his “national interests” toward European countries, such as Belgium, France, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, Turkey, and Poland (Wilson 1918). Wilson saw a rise in nationalist independence movements as “not a threat, but as a moment of readjustment” for the U.S. interests (Chen 2010: 82). Since Wilson’s rhetoric did not directly support Korea’s independence, the March 1st independence movement of 1919 was ultimately suppressed.

The U.S.–Korea Relations in 1945–1953

Since the first U.S. diplomatic envoy visited Korea in 1883, following the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, the U.S. maintained its relations with Korea until 1905, when Japan established a protectorate over Korea, taking control of Korean foreign affairs (Johnson 2011: 120-129). On August 22, 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea as a colony, beginning its 35-year colonial rule over the country. The U.S.'s return to the relations with Korea occurred only at the end of World War II.

After Japan's surrender in 1945, the U.S. oversaw the southern occupation zone, while the Soviet Union controlled the northern occupation zone on the divided Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel. The temporary trusteeship of Korea by the U.S. and the Soviet Union ended when a United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) facilitated elections for a new Korean provisional government. The UNTCOK's plan to elect a unified and independent pan-national Korean government to execute the UN directive under the UN Resolution 112(II) (UN 1947: 16-18) failed because the Soviets denied the UNTCOK access to its northern zone, and the U.S. insisted on holding elections only in its southern zone. Even though Korean leaders made a last-minute effort to encourage national unity in April 1948, external factors, like the U.S. and the Soviet Union, colluded with internal forces (Kim Il-sung in the North and Rhee Syngman in the South) to build up their control over the Korean Peninsula (Cha and Pardo 2023: 44-45). The United Nations adopted the U.S. approach, which was to proceed with elections only in the South. As a result, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) was established on August 15, 1948, with Rhee Syngman as its first president. Later, on September 9, 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)(North Korea) was established, with Kim Il-sung as the

leader.

The Soviet Union ended its occupation of northern Korea in December 1948. It established its economic and military assistance agreements with the DPRK to build “a communist bulwark in Korea” (Cha and Pardo 2023: 45), which, in fact, “substantially strengthened Kim’s regime and enabled a rapid build-up of the North Korean military in the winter of 1949-50” (Cha and Pardo 2023: 45). According to the U.S. Department of State, in a letter written on June 27, 1949, the U.S. government estimated that 102,350 North Korean security forces- 46,000 men in the People’s Army and 56,350 people in the police and military forces. With the help of the Soviet Union, they predicted that North Korea would receive “20 reconnaissance aircraft, 100 fighters, and 30 bombers, light and medium” (U.S. Department of State 1949). Though, by the time the Korean War rolled out, “NKPA (North Korea People’s Army) strength peaked in October 1952 at 266,600 men in eighteen divisions and six independent brigades” (Shrader 1995: 90).

In contrast with the speedy build-up of the North Korean military forces in the North, the 33rd U.S. President Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) completed a withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula by June 1949 to prioritize its commitment to “Western Europe where the dangers of economic collapse and communization threatened Poland, Greece, Turkey, France, and Italy” offering “blanket security commitments (Truman Doctrine) and massive economic assistance (Marshall Plan) to the Europeans” (Cha and Pardo 2023: 45). The Truman administration “placed the burden on the U.N. to administer elections and oversee the establishment of an independent, albeit weak, South Korean government” (Cha and Pardo 2023: 45). President Truman had “wishful thinking” that the South Korea would be able to deter conflict with North Korea through “the South’s inheritance of U.S. military equipment left in the country, U.S. economic assistance, US-trained South Korean forces numbering 45,000, and a residual U.S.

Military Advisory Group" (Cha and Pardo 2023: 45).

After withdrawing from South Korea, the U.S. established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1949 (U.S. Department of State 2020), but without forming a strong alliance, as the U.S. was primarily focused on Western Europe (Cha & Pardo, 2023). However, the two countries' newly born diplomatic relationship encountered immediate challenges during the Korean War. On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea. As a response, a United Nations coalition of 16 countries, led by the U.S., undertook its defense. Since China entered the war on behalf of North Korea later that year, a stalemate ensued for the final two years of the conflict (U.S. Department of State 2020). Concluding the Korean War in 1953, North Korea and the United Nations signed the Korean War armistice on July 27, 1953, but no peace treaty was signed. The U.S. established the Mutual Defense Treaty with South Korea in 1953, which became the "foundation of a comprehensive alliance that endures today" to promote peace and ensure collective defense in the Pacific region by defending against external threats (U.S. Department of State 2020).

Without the Korean War, the U.S. would have focused on rebuilding war-torn Europe instead of dividing its attention and resources with South Korea. The Korean War was a critical juncture for the U.S. relations with South Korea, particularly in terms of their military and diplomatic alliance.

Conclusion

This article analyzes the development of diplomatic relations between Korea and the U.S. It demonstrates how the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation superficially emphasized friendship while

imposing unequal relations and how the U.S. sanctioned Japan's domination of Korea through the 1905 Portsmouth Treaty and the Taft-Katsura Agreement.

In 2023, U.S. President Joe Biden celebrated the 70th anniversary of the U.S. alliance with South Korea when South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol made an official state visit to the White House. President Biden stated that "over the past seven decades, our alliance has grown stronger and more capable, and the cooperation between our people, our commitment to one another has grown deeper across every aspect of our partnership" (Clark 2023). The alliance between the two countries is often attributed to the devastation caused by the Korean War (1950-1953). Unsurprisingly, the U.S. commemorates the Korean War with the most significant number of monuments in the world.

This paper examined how Korea and the U.S. established diplomatic relations prior to the Korean War and how they developed these relations. The initial encounter of the two countries goes back to the Korea-U.S. War of 1871 and resulted in an unequal agreement through the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. This treaty did not intend to establish the strong alliance that the two Presidents celebrated in 2023 but rather to forcefully open Joseon to diplomatic and commercial relations.

Unlike the peace and amity between the two countries that the treaty called for, the U.S. secretly agreed with Japan at the Treaty of Portsmouth in 1905, at the end of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, to allow Japan to colonize Korea. After Japan's surrender in 1945, the temporary trusteeship of Korea by the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and the UNTCOK's facilitation of elections in the southern zone, the U.S. withdrew from the Korean Peninsula to focus on its exclusive commitment to the economic restoration of war-torn Europe. South Korea and the U.S. did not have a strong alliance until they established their collective defense system through

the Mutual Defense Treaty at the end of the Korean War.

Ultimately, the first encounters between Joseon and the U.S. laid the foundation for a complex and evolving relationship between the two countries. However, not only was diplomacy with Joseon a political play by the U.S., but it also shaped the image and perception of Joseon and its people among American citizens as “savage” and “backward.”

The term “Hermit Kingdom” remains applicable to North Korea in the twenty-first century. For example, Hillary Clinton called North Korea “the hermit kingdom” during an informal roundtable in Seoul when she visited South Korea as the Secretary of State in 2009 (ABC News 2009). These early relations, highlighted by curiosity and misinterpretations of Joseon, set the scene for future relations.

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