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Survival politics: Regime security and alliance institutionalization

Inwook KIM
Singapore Management University, ikim@smu.edu.sg

Jackson WOODS

Survival Politics: Regime Security and Alliance Design on the Korean Peninsula

Inwook Kim [1] and Jackson Woods[2]

[1] Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea and [2] Microsoft, USA

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Abstract: What determines states' willingness to institutionalize alliances? Contrary to conventional emphasis on system-level conditions, we argue that states pay close attention to the domestic political consequences of institutionalizing alliances. This is particularly true for unequal allies. Client regimes are disproportionately sensitive to alliance design, as it affects patron allies' ability to influence their military, distribute finance and arms, and legitimate preferred political groups. Two factors—power consolidation and political compatibility—determine whether the client views alliance institutionalization as complementary or conflictual with regime survival. The divergent alliance designs North and South Korea chose after the Korean War support our argument. An unresolved power consolidation process forced Kim Il-Sung to refuse formalizing the wartime alliance with the PRC, and Kim concluded a minimal treaty in 1961 after consolidating his power. In contrast, rapid consolidation left Rhee Syngman little to fear from continuing the highly institutionalized wartime alliance arrangement with the United States, which accepted his authority in the south. Our findings have important implications for alliance design, intra-alliance politics, and civil–military relations.

Keywords: alliance institutionalization, civil-military relations, asymmetric alliance, alliance design, Korean Peninsula

As the Korean War came to a close in 1953, leaders in South and North grappled with preparations for postwar politics on the Korean Peninsula. One key area concerned the fate of temporary wartime alliances formed with the United States and China, respectively. Despite shared initial alliance conditions and similarly configured security incentives to maintain credible deterrence in the aftermath of the war, however, the two Koreas pushed their alliances for divergent paths. South Korea concluded a mutual defense treaty with the United States in 1953, kept the combined command structure, and continued to host tens of thousands of American troops. In stark contrast, North Korea immediately terminated the Sino-Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) wartime combined command, completed the withdrawal of Chinese troops by 1958, and only signed a minimal alliance later in 1961.

Why did South Korea opt for a highly institutionalized alliance even before the armistice, while North Korea waited almost ten years and signed a much more loosely institutionalized alliance with China? Alliance designs vary significantly, ranging from simple nonaggression agreements to deeply intertwined systems of command. In accounting for states' preferences about particulars of alliances,

the existing literature tends to focus on states' strategic calculus in handling external security challenges. States may institutionalize alliances to more effectively entrap or restrain partner allies, for instance, or they may intend to promote intra-ally coordination and cooperation, improve military effectiveness, and enhance alliance credibility vis-à-vis strategic opponents.

Because the two Koreas faced similar system-level incentives, the existing literature struggles to account for their opposite preferences. Instead, we argue that leaders assess the consequences of institutionalizing alliances according to their regime security. The DPRK's Kim Il-Sung (Kim) and the ROK's Rhee Syng-Man (Rhee) were highly sensitive to alliance choices, because when unequal partners become allies in a patron–client relation, the weaker client subjects itself to the stronger patron's material power and authority. This influence can interfere with the client's ability to control, manage, and strengthen its own domestic political power. Three dimensions of domestic politics—the client's civil–military relations, access to finance and arms, and regime legitimacy—are particularly sensitive to the alliance arrangement.

We contend that the two leaders' preferences on alliance institutionalization diverged due to contrasting domestic political conditions. We develop the argument in two steps, using power consolidation and political compatibility as intervening variables. First, in designing an alliance, the client decides whether to prioritize system-level security requirements or domestic regime security by the degree to which he or she has consolidated power. The consolidated leader can afford to focus on the broader strategic rationale, while domestic political implications dominate alliance politics for the unconsolidated leader. Second, the level of compatibility between a patron's goals and the client state leader's domestic political agenda decides whether the client expects alliance institutionalization to strengthen or undermine its own regime. A combination of power consolidation and political compatibility then determines a client regime's preferences for different alliance designs, which fall into either no alliance, alliance without institutionalization, or alliance with institutionalization.

This framework largely captures the alliance choices by the two Koreas. By 1953, Rhee had acquired near absolute power in South Korean domestic politics and saw the United States as a compatible, albeit far from perfectly aligned, partner in his pursuit of regime security. Such perception created favorable conditions for a deeply institutionalized alliance. On the other hand, unconsolidated Kim opted for a cancellation of wartime security ties in 1953 as intense factional politics would have made his leadership even more vulnerable to the power of the PRC, which he saw as a politically incompatible patron state. After successfully eliminating rivals and consolidating his power during the

1950s, Kim finally chose to ally with China in 1961 to address the external security conditions but without institutionalization to minimize any room for China's future interference.

The domestic explanation for alliance institutionalization reveals how and why some client states are likely to keep even important and powerful allies at arms' length. While others have previously argued that states prioritize the internal threat environment over external security requirements (Barnett and Levy 1991; David 1991), this article shifts the focus away from when and with whom to ally to what alliances look like. Furthermore, analysis of patron–client alliance relations often focuses solely on the patron's preferences, implicitly suggesting that the patron determines the alliance structure (Cha 2010; Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016). In contrast, this paper contributes to the asymmetric alliance literature by uncovering how client states' preferences and behaviors emerge, which are distinct from those of their patron states, a neglected but key variable for intra-alliance politics.

The paper begins with a literature review, followed by setting up the theory about the role of domestic politics in alliance institutionalization. Then, we examine two in-depth comparative case studies of US–ROK and PRC–DPRK alliance politics in the 1950s. The last section discusses theoretical and policy implications and proposes agenda for future research.

Accounting for the Two Koreas' Divergent Preferences

The Two Koreas' Divergent Preferences

The Korean War began with a North Korea's surprise attack on June 25, 1950. An initially localized war soon escalated by involving outside powers with whom the two Koreas formed highly institutionalized wartime alliances, both in desperate attempts to save themselves from their respective collapses. First, amid South Korea's rapidly crumbling defense line, the United States hastily began its intervention on July 1 and the official wartime alliance structure was formed shortly after when President Rhee voluntarily handed over South Korea's operational command to the United Nations (UN) forces on July 15. Then, the war's tide turned with the successful Inchon landing in September. By October, it was North Korea on the verge of collapse due to the subsequent UN forces' counterattack. Alarmed by the strategic implications of North Korea's defeat, China intervened in the Korean War in mid-October. Military cooperation between the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA) and the Korean People's Army (KPA) deepened and, to improve the effectiveness of their

combined forces and with Stalin's encouragement, North Korea's leader Kim agreed to submit KPA's operational control to the Sino-North Korea Joint Headquarters in December, headed by CPVA Commander, Peng Dehuai.

The two similarly configured alliance arrangements would remain intact for the reminder of the war. When the war came to an inconclusive end in July 1953, however, the two Koreas handled their respective wartime alliances in remarkably different manners. We identify three variations in their preferences on alliance design: (1) Rhee's acceptance of a highly institutionalized alliance in 1953 that included putting its entire forces under UN/US operational control (OPCON) with tens of thousands American troops in the country (alliance with institutionalization), (2) Kim's prompt termination of the joint headquarters and no formalization of military relations in July 1953 (no alliance), and (3) Kim's signing of a minimal security treaty in July 1961 (alliance without institutionalization).

How to Design Alliances

In operationalizing levels of alliance institutionalization, Leeds and Anac (2005) created an index that codes them into low, moderate, and high. Military agreements that do not involve meaningfully institutionalized forms of military interaction such as nonaggression pacts, neutrality, or consultation pacts fall into a low category, while above such alliances lie moderately institutionalized alliances that make provision for regularized consultations or other forms of ongoing cooperation separate from mutual defense provisions of the alliance treaty. We code both categories as alliance without institutionalization, partly to reflect that they represent reversal of highly institutionalized alliance structures that both Koreas had been operating during the war with their patron allies. Accordingly, to qualify as institutionalized alliance, it must have any of an integrated military command, shared basing, and a common defense policy among the allies, a requirement to qualify as highly institutionalized alliance (Leeds and Anac 2005).

Why and when would states institutionalize an alliance? A large body of literature examines the logic behind alliance design and we focus on three main arguments—rational design, asymmetric alliances, and domestic explanation—directly relevant to the two Koreas' inclination for alliance institutionalization. However, we find that none offers suitable frameworks to make sense of why Kim and Rhee diverged from the similarly configured alliances in the 1950s.

First, the rationalist approach posits that states institutionalize alliances in order to promote security interests. For instance, a tighter alliance sends a more credible signal to potential adversaries about the ally's resolve to assist in the event of war by imposing greater costs of breaking the agreement

(Morrow 1994; Abbott and Snidal 2000; Leeds and Anac 2005; Gibler 2008). Some features of institutionalized alliances, such as a physical military presence or a combined command structure, act as tripwires in times of external invasion and may also enhance wartime performance (Moller 2016).

The system-level strategic motive, however, is at odd with the contrasting preferences on alliance design between Rhee and Kim. Each shared similar strategic incentives. In 1953, the threats of future conflicts remained sharp for both sides, especially after the unusually destructive and violent three-year long war, which left not only the elites, but also the mass population with extreme hostility toward one another, embedded in strong fervor for unification. One aspect that separated the two was their geographical proximities to the patrons such that DPRK could expect more prompt PRC intervention than ROK could for US surge of troops in the event of military crisis. From strategic viewpoints, however, DPRK still could benefit from CPVA's continued military presence as it could compensate PRC's less sophisticated projection capability, act as tripwires, and assist reconstruction of war-torn economies in the North. The structural incentives were comparable, if not identical, casting doubt on the explanatory power of a strategic rationalist approach to the two Koreas' preferences.

In fact, this raises a more fundamental gap in the literature: alliance institutionalization is rarely studied as a dependent variable, remaining "one of the outstanding puzzles in the field" (Leeds 2015). At present, the literature implicitly assumes that the intended security effects, such as enhanced credibility and capability of deterrence, are what have determined the alliance design in the first place.1 The two Koreas' opposite preferences suggest that such an approach cannot tell us why certain countries forego these benefits, while others do not. Methodologically, the dominance of large-*n* studies and formal modeling within this subfield also create gaps, lacking qualitative studies to guide research into the complex political environments faced by leaders such as Rhee and Kim and the decisions made under those conditions.

Second, the literature on asymmetric alliances uncovers unique alliance dynamics involving unequal allies (Altfeld 1984; Morrow 1991; Pressman 2008). Such alliances often function as patron–client relations whereby small and insecure states who seek additional security resources (clients) make concessions in policy autonomy to major power allies (patrons), who are capable of providing a level of military resources that client states cannot secure on their own.

The war experiences of the two Koreas closely approximate such dynamics—both South and North Korea were on the verge of collapse in different phases during the war, only to be rescued by their

patron allies' military interventions. The regime-saving alliances did not come free, however, but at a price of autonomy concessions, most notably their surrender of operational command to their patron allies. Toward the end of the war, whether to continue, change, or terminate such structure carried huge ramifications on both the inter-Korean balance of power as well as each Korea's regime security. In particular, the institutionalized features of alliances amplified the strategic trade-off between security and autonomy as it meant enhanced alliance credibility and deterrence at the greater expense of military policy subordination to a foreign patron power (Morrow 1991). Naturally, the client's internal politics and regime stability are highly sensitive to the latter dimension of alliance institutionalization (Stravers and Kurd 2019), and this makes the logic of a client's preferences toward institutionalization distinct from those of a patron.

Unfortunately, the literature has barely examined the clients' viewpoints while almost exclusively emphasizing the great powers' perspectives and priorities (Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002; Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016). For instance, scholars observed that US policymakers used the integrated command to control ROK policy and prevent entrapment, but little explanation is given as to how Rhee perceived such an arrangement (Cha 2010; Kim 2011). The gap is problematic (Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016, 137). It is one matter to come up with a logic of patrons' strategic preferences, but quite another to theorize the interactions between their preferences and those of the clients. One notable exception is Izumikawa (2020) who traces an origin of a hub-and-spokes system in East Asia to undertheorized preferences of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan during the formative years of the region's Cold war in the 1950s. The designs of bilateral asymmetric alliances within the hub-and-spokes system can similarly benefit from problematizing the preferences and perception of client states.

Finally, a last set of studies has looked at the causes and consequences of states prioritizing internal politics over external conditions when making alliance choices. Steven David developed a theory of "omnibalancing" to explain the alliance behavior of "Third World" leaders, arguing that they account both for domestic political threats and external security threats when deciding whether and with whom to form an alliance (David 1991). David notes that the politics of "Third World" countries (or, more generally, weak client states) tend to differ from the alliance politics practiced among great powers: where great powers are primarily oriented toward external security, leaders in the weak clients make rational calculations about which great power ally is most likely to do what is necessary to keep the leader in power. Barnett and Levy similarly argue for attention to the internal dynamics and incentives that weaker states face when considering alliances and alignments, examining Egypt's

shifting choices during 1962–1973 (Barnett and Levy 1991). This paper builds in part on this insight that problematizes the within-state politics to account for states' military policy and power (Talmadge 2016; Wolford and Ritter 2016; Fravel 2018) or alliance structure or termination (Aydinli and Erpul 2021; Rapport and Rathbun 2021). Indeed, as we elaborate below, the internal politics developed entirely differently across the two Koreas, presenting powerful and distinctive opportunities and challenges in deciding not only whether leaders should keep their wartime allies, but also what type of alliance they would favor.

Alliance Institutionalization and Domestic Politics

In many regimes, threats are often domestic rather than foreign—in fact, during the Cold War, a majority of overthrown regimes in the Third World fell to internal opposition, not external invasion (David 1991). We posit that client regimes that are disproportionately exposed to the patrons' power would be highly sensitive to specific forms of alliance structure. Alliance design entails a unique set of political implications, not only regarding common external threats, but also for the domestic political landscape. This section surveys three distinct pathways—military control, access to resources, and legitimation of regime—by which alliance institutionalization allows the patron outsized leverage over the client regime.

Military Control

Under an institutionalized alliance, the patron ally assumes close and substantive control over the client's military, in stark contrast to alliances based on little more than a written promise to assist in times of crisis. This generates huge political clout for patron states because the military's political orientation, preferences, and behaviors are a key determinant for regime stability. In particular, due to the possibility of the military's direct or indirect support for regime-ending coups, the client regime can never treat alliance arrangements that tie military posture and policy to a patron ally solely as instances of military–military cooperation.

At a basic level, alliance institutionalization regularizes, diversifies, and deepens the patron's interaction with the client's military officers and institutions. For instance, institutionalized alliances are often accompanied by permanent combined offices to coordinate the alliance activities or even a standing military organization, in which the physical presence of a central command and interaction with counterparts insert hierarchical relations into military planning, training, and personnel (Wallace

2008). These can then be used to orient the client's military toward the patron's political preferences, and thereby influence domestic political dynamics.

Institutionalization not only deepens and expands the forms of interaction. Its impact arguably runs deeper by creating a broad incentive structure whereby political alignment with the patron ally's preferences is encouraged and rewarded within the client's military. Officers with deep knowledge and extensive experience with the patron ally's counterparts are more valuable in an organization where close cooperation is a key to success. Patrons can also favor and even sponsor those officers with close ties to their own military culture and representatives, reinforcing its influence over the military's inner circles. Overall, a tight alliance structure creates more influence for a patron over the "core organizational activities" (Talmadge 2016, 115–120) of the militaries, such as promotion, training, command arrangement, and information management, thus either intentionally or inadvertently, causing the patron to assume a larger role in the civil–military relations within the client regime.

Access to Resources

Alliance institutionalization can potentially alter the client regime's access to resources critical to regime security, often in an immediate and decisive manner. First, by encouraging, expanding, and regularizing the arms, finance, and materiel transfers, alliance institutionalization creates more space for the client ally to divert finite financial resources away from national security requirements to internal regime security, particularly social welfare, the internal security apparatus, and political engineering (Kimball 2010; Allen and Digiuseppe 2013). It then helps create and maintain political patronage while dampening the opposition's relative resources for mobilization against the regime. Second, alliance institutionalization enhances the deterrence effect by imposing higher costs for reneging on the alliance and by creating more diverse forms of military cooperation and coordination such as deployment of troops, combined exercises, prepositioning of equipment, or even the legal assumption of control over the client's military. It correspondingly reduces the client state's own defense requirements (Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016), allowing it to effectively free ride on the patron's extended deterrence and further freeing resources to meet domestic goals (Lanoszka 2015).

However, the material benefits are neither automatic, nor consistent, nor unconditional. A patron may decide to withhold transfers, using it as a bargaining chip to extract other political or strategic

concessions. Even worse, if the patron directs resources to potential rivals to the regime, the reconfigured power balance could then become a regime-threatening force.

Legitimation of Regime

Regime legitimacy is a final pillar of regime stability, which is alterable by alliance formalization and institutionalization (Ratner 2009). On the one hand, many features associated with alliance institutionalization, such as basing American troops, reinforce the regime's legitimacy by allowing the regime to project itself as a shrewd national security engineer to the domestic audience in the name of securing enhanced extended deterrence and/or added material transfer from the patron ally. Furthermore, institutionalizing an alliance with a patron credited with certain regime-legitimating ideological, religious, or political values can further the client's legitimacy and acceptability in the eyes of both domestic and international audiences. Ultimately, if the patron is seen favorably, the client leader may claim that more an institutionalized relationship represents a major diplomatic achievement, especially if the client leader can successfully paint it as an endorsement of the regime by the patron.

Alignment with a foreign patron, however, is not always popular and thus not without risk (McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017). The oft-hierarchical nature of alliance institutions draws criticism that the regime is a mere puppet of a foreign power. In practice, the patron frequently does gain advantages in the client's politics and economy, which then are easily channeled to nationalist frustration. Such perceptions can even mobilize a regime-overthrowing level of public anger as was the case in Iran during the 1970s. Similarly, certain institutionalized features such as a combined command involve relinquishing at least parts of states' sovereignty in military policy and command, which could be the subject of sizeable political opposition. This is still the case in South Korea today.

Power Consolidation, Political Compatibility, and Alliance Design

For many client states, regime stability is a more immediate risk than state survival. Indeed, since 1945, a majority of overthrown regimes in the Third World have fallen to internal opposition, not external invasion (David 1991). When deciding on alliance designs, we therefore posit that the client regimes first consider whether deeper alliance ties would empower or weaken their regime security, not just the strategic benefit to state security. The two Koreas were not exceptions. In fact, the two Koreas were more susceptible to their respective patrons' resources and influence, for they not only

faced mutual hostility in 1953, but also were newly born states with war-torn economies and shattered societies.

We contend that two variables—power consolidation and political compatibility—approximate how the client regime assesses the domestic consequences of deeper relations with its patron ally. With a two-step framework, we show that their combined effects create distinct and sufficiently powerful incentive structures to which the client leaders are compelled to respond, which then yield diverse preferences over how to organize alliance relations with powerful patron allies.

Power Consolidation

In the first step, power consolidation determines whether the leader can afford to disregard the domestic political consequences of tightening security ties and prioritizing system-level security requirements. Power consolidation refers to the degree to which the regime's power is consolidated vis-à-vis rival factions. A leader in a consolidated regime has full control and faces little to no viable opposition. Absent other contenders for power, the client leader feels sufficiently assured that closer security ties with the patron are unlikely to backfire in his or her own domestic standing in any immediate and decisive manner. In this case, the client leader can afford to rank national security above regime security in deciding the level of alliance institutionalization.

In theory, the patron may decide to switch its protégé in the long run. However, power consolidation creates a much higher cost and risk for patron allies to successfully sponsor an alternative leader. Patrons would need to build such alternative leadership in the first place; the new leader's reliability and loyalty is unknown, and newly installed and friendlier regimes may prove incompetent. Hence, power consolidation significantly shields the client leader from the patron's temptation to negatively exercise its own political leverage over its client's military, material resources, and legitimacy, and therefore creates permissive environment for the client leaders to focus on the external security environment.

Conversely, in an unconsolidated regime, the presence of rival factions exacerbates the relevance of domestic politics to alliance design. Alliance institutionalization enhances the patron ally's power in contested domestic politics, which can potentially save or undermine the regime. It decisively alters the balance of power between the leadership and the opponents, as the patron's influence over the military, material support programs, and legitimation of the preferred leader tends to be larger and more immediate given tighter military relations. Consequently, winning the patron's blessing becomes a central objective in the regime's internal power struggle. Domestic political conditions rank highest

in such situations: leaders work to acquire precious support and material benefits from the patron ally, while denying them to rival groups.

Political Compatibility

In the next step, the client leader considers political compatibility: the degree to which the patron's political preferences are aligned with the client regime's political orientation. Political compatibility decides whether the client leaders anticipate that the benefits outweigh the costs of institutionalizing military ties. In coding a politically compatible patron–client relation, we do not require a perfect alignment of the political orientation, which rarely exists in practice. Instead, the two allies are "politically compatible" if the patron is simultaneously committed to the client's *regime survival* and *state security*. For instance, despite some serious sources of discontent, the United States and Nicaragua were politically compatible in the 1930s under the definition, as Franklin Roosevelt's reference to Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza and his regime attests: "they may be sons of bitches, but at least they are our sons of bitches" (Bellin 2004, 148). In this case, the client expects closer relations with the patron that would not interfere with, if not bolster, his or her regime security.

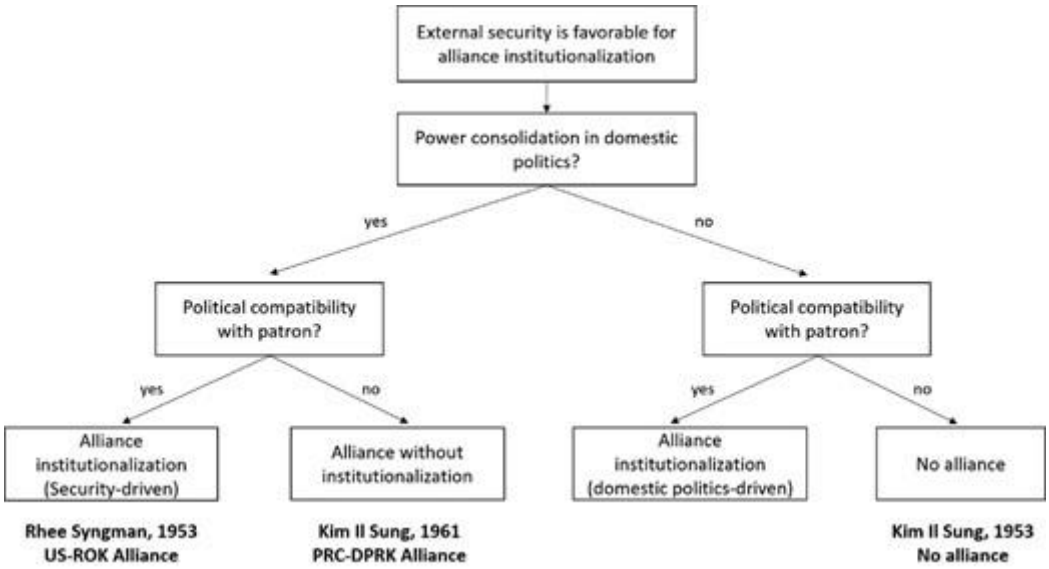
By contrast, the two are "politically incompatible" when the patron is committed to the client state's security, but not to the current regime's survival. Separating the two is not only a conceptual distinction but a policy practice historically exercised by great powers. For instance, patron allies have a track record of sponsoring coerced removals of the client's leadership, such as Mohammad Mossaddeq in 1953 by the United States, Alexander Dubček in 1968 by the Soviet Union, or US political pressure in favor of democratization in South Korea in 1987. In none of the above cases, was the patron's commitment to extended deterrence in question. Put differently, a pledge to defend the client state against external threats does not necessarily equate to a defense of the ruling leadership. Since the patron's leverage grows with alliance institutionalization, we posit that the client perceives closer military ties with a politically incompatible patron ally as a regime-threatening liability and therefore prefers to keep a healthy political distance with the patron when designing an alliance.

From Domestic Politics to Alliance Institutionalization

Put together, a mix of power consolidation and political compatibility can account for clients' different preferences for institutionalizing alliance relations with their patron allies (Figure 1). When power is consolidated, the clients can afford not to be overly concerned with potential adverse consequences of alliance institutionalization, and therefore opt for the alliance arrangement that broadly corresponds to the security requirement. However, the desirability of alliance

institutionalization varies according to the political compatibility variable. In the presence of political compatibility, alliance institutionalization is a welcome opportunity for a consolidated leader. On the security side, it promises enhanced alliance credibility and overall fighting capability against external threats. At the same time, on the domestic political front, the client leaders are likely to evaluate greater patron influence in a positive light. The evidence we present below strongly suggests that Rhee's acceptance of an institutionalized alliance in 1953–1954 falls into this category.

Figure 1.



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Power consolidation, political compatibility, and alliance design.

External security is favorable for alliance institutionalization
Power consolidation in domestic politics?
yes
no
Political compatibility with patron?
Political compatibility with patron?
yes
no
yes
no
Alliance institutionalization (Security-driven)
Alliance without institutionalization
Alliance institutionalization (domestic politics-driven)
No alliance
Rhee Syngman, 1953 US-ROK Alliance
Kim Il Sung, 1961 PRC-DPRK Alliance
Kim Il Sung, 1953 No alliance

On the other hand, if a consolidated leader faces a politically incompatible patron—in other words, one who is perceived as willing to sponsor future rivals—then alliance institutionalization could be a double-edged sword for the client regime. On the one hand, tightening security ties helps deal with external threats with greater credibility and at less cost. On the other hand, while power consolidation in domestic politics leaves the leader with some breathing space to focus on external security conditions, the underlying political misalignment raises doubts about whether and how the patron may intervene in the client's domestic politics in the long run. Such conditions capture why Kim pushed for a military alliance without institutionalization in the early 1960s, which represents a strategic compromise to at least partly address external threats while minimizing political room for the alliance to become too closely entangled with Kim's regime security.

By contrast, when the client feels insecure in domestic politics, domestic political considerations dominate the client's assessment of the utility of alliance institutionalization. Due to the presence of a viable opposition, political compatibility carries much greater weight as patronage could interfere with internal politics and influence regime security vis-à-vis rival groups. Broadly speaking, if the client regime sees the patron's preferences as compatible and aligned, the client will likely view alliance institutionalization as an important asset in its power struggle against the domestic opponents, for it helps to tighten its control over civil–military relations, secure additional material resources vis-à-vis rival factions, and strengthen its legitimacy. The two Koreas during the 1950s do not match these conditions. One potential candidate case is arguably Rhee in the late 1940s. Domestically struggling but politically compatible with Washington, Rhee pushed for tightening ties with the United States, which by June 1949 had completed the withdrawal of its military forces from the Korean Peninsula. The efforts bore fruit when the two countries signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Act in 1950. While the episode appears to bear our theoretical expectation, we do not examine this period. Including a prewar period prevents controlling of conditions surrounding security environment and intra-alliance politics which turned fundamentally different following the experiences of war in 1950–1953. Instead, we leave this mechanism as a theoretical exercise and its testing with other cases for future research.

Lastly, co-existence of an unconsolidated client leader and incompatible patron makes even a thin alliance particularly toxic to regime security, as it creates official and unofficial channels between the politically misaligned patrons and rival domestic factions. Ample room emerges for the client to worry about its ostensible patron's political intervention. For instance, the patron could leverage its aid to materially favor the rivals or merely threaten such a policy, form a marriage of political

convenience with the rivals, launch public and private campaigns to undercut the client regime's legitimacy, and use or threaten to use its leverage in the client's military against the regime. The political cost and risk are too high in these circumstances and consequently, we posit that an unconsolidated client would refuse any type of security ties with an incompatible patron. We support this with an examination of Kim's push to end formal military ties to the PRC during the 1950s.

Rhee and the US–ROK Alliance

Near the end of the Korean War, the form of the alliance that Rhee hoped to secure with the United States became a core question for the regime's prospective security. Rhee was all for converting the temporary wartime cooperation into a stronger, binding, permanent security pact. While there was a real strategic necessity for strong deterrence, highly favorable domestic conditions were what made the mutual defense treaty politically acceptable to Rhee. By the war's end, Rhee achieved near "absolute power," which meant that the United States' institutionalized alliance commitment was expected to make Rhee even more well-resourced and preserve his legitimacy.

Rhee Consolidates Power, 1948–1953

When the Korean Peninsula was liberated with the Japanese surrender in August 1945, political actors on the peninsula were hardly settled and equipped to take up the challenge of nation-building. This political uncertainty was soon exacerbated when the United States and the Soviet Union effectively divided Korea along the thirty-eighth parallel. Amid the chaos, Rhee was sworn in as the first president of the ROK in August 1948, with his political position far from consolidated. Many of his political rivals who had refused to participate in the 1948 presidential and general elections were still active and well-organized. At first, the stability and legitimacy of Rhee's presidency suffered continuous setbacks, including recurring insurrections, violent government crackdowns, polarized politics, economic distress, and worsening social disintegration. The political climate had deteriorated fast for the government, which eventually resulted in Rhee's failure to secure a majority in the May 1950 general election.

It was ironically the Korean War that saved Rhee from political downfall. The war brought on US intervention and financial aid, while dampening dissenting voices. As the frontline stabilized by mid-1952, Rhee aggressively seized opportunities to centralize and consolidate his power. The most conspicuous and decisive was the 1952 Busan incident, when Rhee proclaimed martial law, arrested

politicians from opposition parties, and revised the constitution. At the same time, the war effectively removed the leftist elites and left-leaning masses, many of whom migrated to the North. The remaining population became silent under rampant anti-communism (Han 1972, 44–45). These efforts soon bore fruit. In August 1952, Rhee won the second presidential election in a 74.6 percent landslide. In the 1954 general election, his power reached its pinnacle as his Liberal Party secured two-thirds of the National Assembly seats. Though far from legitimate or peaceful, Rhee's dictatorial power was increasingly becoming robust and irreversible.

Equally important, the opposition was in total disarray. Several potent rivals had been removed through assassinations, kidnappings, or political downfall.2 Among those remaining, few could match Rhee's nationalist credentials, personal charisma, and skillful use of coercive and manipulative politics. Lee Beom-Suk, an ex-prime minister, was probably the closest to a ready-made answer to replace Rhee, but was deemed extreme and reckless (Lee 2007). The military was no different. In July 1953, an intelligence report of the Department of State assessed that a full-fledged military coup "probably would be successful," but nevertheless concluded that the top military leadership "would be reluctant to act against the President … [because] they are not fully united, and consequently might be fearful of making an abortive move that would invite Rhee's vengeance…" (Department of State 1953).

From Washington's perspective, Rhee was an irritating but ultimately irreplaceable counterpart. On the one hand, Rhee's stubborn and capricious political maneuvers had constantly caused distress in the US war efforts. Such concerns deepened even further as armistice negotiations drew toward a close in May–June of 1953, as American policymakers grew particularly worried that Rhee might take unilateral action to continue prosecuting the war in defiance of US commitment to the opposite ("Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion at a Department of State—Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting" 1953). Rhee publicly refused to back away from demands for full unification and the removal of all Chinese troops from the North, both impossible to achieve without major military offensives. As Rhee himself put it when presented with an American armistice proposal, he found unfavorable: "You can withdraw all UN Forces, all economic aid. We will decide our own fate. … Sorry, but I cannot assure President Eisenhower of my cooperation…" (Schnabel and Watson 1998). Eventually, US–ROK friction intensified to such a degree that on May 4, Lt. Gen. Maxwell Taylor in command of the US Eighth Army submitted Operation Everready to policymakers in Washington ("Paper Submitted by the Commanding General of the United States Eighth Army (Taylor)" 1953). Everready addressed a range of contingencies for ROK resistance to an armistice, including taking

custody of “dissident military and civil leaders,” including Rhee, as one possible element of the response should ROK forces begin to operate independently of or in opposition to UN command.

In the end, however, Washington came to accept that among the remaining Korean elites, Rhee was the only viable candidate. The immediate response of the Secretaries of State and Defense to Operation Everready was unequivocal: “We cannot concur with any action on your part which would establish a United Nations Command (UNC) military government in ROK” (“Memorandum for the Record, Prepared by the Assistant Chief of Staff, G–3, Department of the Army (Eddleman)” 1953). As General Clark later acknowledged, Operation Everready “would've been a tough job to do, [while] old man Rhee was a tough character… [and] his people would have supported him” (Logan 1977). Political consequences of removing such a leader entailed a possibility of potentially disastrous outcomes. During a joint discussion of the plan between the Department of State and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Donald Duncan concisely stated the degree to which Rhee was the only option: “It seems to me that if Rhee is not brought into line we will be faced with the possibility of a disastrous military defeat” (“Memorandum of the Substance of Discussion at a Department of State–Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting” 1953).

Ultimately, the United States had no option but to rely on Rhee's “almost unlimited governmental power” (Department of State 1953) to build a viable, competent, anti-communist state in war-torn South Korea, a key objective of US post-truce strategy in Northeast Asia. The shared objectives in the overarching goals about the future of ROK was integral in building a general sense of political compatibility that overrode frictions and disagreements over various issues at hand. John Foster Dulles, who once called the ROK President a “master of evasion” (Cumings 2005, 306), nevertheless was against an idea to ditch Rhee, who he saw as “far from perfect but a great patriot and anti-communist and organized his country so that they put up a good fight, and he is not as bad as Communist smear portrays him” (Pruessen 1982, 453).

Furthermore, after spending billions of dollars and sacrificing tens of thousands of lives, Washington simply could not afford to abandon Rhee, whose political fate was now increasingly intertwined with US credibility among its allies (Brands 1987). His forceful control of the country was now “an asset rather than a liability,” (“Memorandum of Discussion at the 276th Meeting of the National Security Council” 1956) despite his antidemocratic practices, diplomatic brinkmanship, and sharp disagreements on specific policies. Indeed, President Eisenhower was ultimately presented with, and agreed to, a proposal to offer Rhee a bilateral security alliance in exchange for his cooperation rather than a recommendation to pursue Operation Everready (“Memorandum for the Record, Prepared by

the Assistant Chief of Staff, G–3, Department of the Army (Eddleman)" 1953). As Eisenhower put it, "We still love you, you s.o.b." ("Memorandum of Discussion at the 193rd Meeting of the National Security Council" 1954).

And Rhee well knew his value to Washington. As early as mid-1952, Rhee became aware of US plan to overthrow him following the Busan incident and install Prime Minister Jang Myeon instead. However, United States' ultimate restraint ultimately ended with "learning effect" for Rhee that Washington was either unwilling or incapable of doing so, which accounted for Rhee's repeated exercise of hard bargaining tactics during the war and beyond (Park 2012, 129–33). It was not just the lack of alternatives that emboldened Rhee. South Korea now was treated as "a sandbag holding back the onrushing waters for a disarmed Japan and a stretched United States," (Cumings 2005, 305) and security threats to the ROK were taken increasingly seriously. Accordingly, the United States simply could not risk mass political confusion and power vacuum that Rhee's removal would likely create. Rhee also apparently felt more strongly that the United States "cannot do without him," believing that the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 made Rhee regime's survival more critical in the larger scheme of Washington's Cold War strategy ("The Ambassador in Korea (Briggs) to the Department of State" 1954b).

All for Alliance

Therefore, Rhee was bargaining with the United States under favorable domestic conditions in the final months of the war as well as in its aftermath, based on a mix of power consolidation and political compatibility. Under such circumstances, Rhee had few reasons to oppose institutionalized alliance ties with the United States, which would enhance deterrence without interfering in his grip to power. Rhee did not show meaningful opposition to the arrangement of combined command or providing bases for US forces throughout his engagement with Washington over a mutual defense treaty in 1953 and the Agreed Minutes in 1954. In fact, Rhee once remarked that pulling out ROK forces from UNC would be "childish," which he "never had in mind" ("The Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Department of State" 1953), while in his meeting with John Foster Dulles later, Secretary of State, Rhee reportedly said, "as long as we travel together, it is understood that we will stay together in the UNC" ("Memorandum of Conversation, by the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs (Young)" 1953). Similarly, Rhee repeatedly requested for continuing presence of US air and naval forces in South Korea throughout discussions with his US counterparts.

Undoubtedly, formalizing the institutionalized features of wartime alliance was seen as a critical national security asset that would help address its abandonment fear and strengthen defense and deterrence against DPRK and PRC troops stationed in the North via the defense treaty's security guarantee, accompanied by US forces in presence, an integrated military command, and provision of large-scale military and economic aid. Yet such arrangements could also advance Rhee's domestic material balance of power and regime legitimacy, and thanks to his firm grip on power, without incurring undue interference from the larger ally, thus resolving the "basic dilemma of the smaller ally" (Suhrke 1973, 511).

First, the institutionalized alliance guaranteed that the United States would invest heavily in building competent anti-communist state in South Korea, from which Rhee could sustain his absolute power materially (Ahn 1995, 181). This mix of security guarantee, military buildup, and financial assistance bolstered Rhee's grip on power via multiple mechanisms. Above all, the powerful and cost-effective deterrent against external threats significantly freed Rhee to focus his political capital on elite rivals (Greitens 2016). Similarly, thanks to the de facto security guarantee, Rhee, unlike leaders in other Third World states, did not have to bargain with key elites or the population to safeguard and reserve resources for the military (Brazinsky 2007, 27). The pressure to extract taxes from the state was also correspondingly lower, further reinforcing Rhee's bargaining position. Last but not least, portions of military and economic aid were misappropriated to create, maintain, and expand a massive network of loyal clients (Haggard and Moon 1993, 62–63). The military aid was a particularly easy target (Kim 2000, 57). The state budget was highly concentrated in military spending in the 1950s, forming between 40–60 percent of the entire budget. Until 1958, military spending outweighed civilian spending (Hong 1999, 110).

Second, a tightly institutionalized alliance served to protect Rhee's domestic legitimacy from the much-criticized truce (Suhrke 1973, 517). This was because an armistice was hardly the outcome envisioned either by Rhee personally or most of the domestic population; both favored complete defeat of the communists and unification. Rhee, however, was advised flatly by his generals that successful unification by ROK military actions only was simply unworkable ("The Ambassador in Korea (Briggs) to the Department of State" 1954a), and Rhee began to undertake actions designed to minimize the political risk of leaving unification unrealized. For instance, his infamously fierce opposition to the armistice may have been partly motivated by political necessity, making people feel that Rhee had a real voice in the negotiations (Kim 2007).

Rhee had to bring more tangible successes, however, to justify the truce and thereby save his regime (Suh 1990, 144). And in many respects, a tightly institutionalized and reliable alliance with the free world's superpower met the requirement. Rhee could present it not only as credible compensation for backing down from the demand for unification or Chinese PLA evacuation from the peninsula, but also as a major diplomatic achievement that tied Korean security to US-extended deterrence. In many respects, alliance with the United States was a legitimacy-saving achievement that prevented backlash toward Rhee for falling short of his previous rhetoric.

Third, Rhee was well-resourced vis-à-vis the ROK military, reducing the threat to his regime from subordinating military command to the United States. Like many newly independent states then, the ROK military was one of the few functioning organizations that possessed significant material resources and administrative capacity. Putting such an organization under the command of a foreign ally was accordingly potentially dangerous, and Rhee noted that ROK "as a sovereign country had right to make different arrangement at some later time…" ("The Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson) to the Department of State" 1953). Indeed, the United States continually monitored the ROK military and occasionally explored possibilities for setting the military against Rhee's administration. Its core officer corps had been rapidly "Americanized" through military training and combined wartime operations, and many began to dissent from Rhee on military aspects of the war, who was accordingly put under the pressure to perform "a dangerous dance between king (Rhee) and teacher (US)" (Na 2006, 153).

In 1953, however, the military was simply nowhere near assuming the role of challenger. The military itself was far from united, being split into factions, providing something for Rhee to continually exploit during and after the war (Department of State 1953). Rhee also distributed "private goods" to the military, which then formed a core of his "winning coalition" (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). His commitment and diplomacy efforts to expand the ROK military also won support among military circles. This, in turn, made challenging him a costly, risky, and unattractive endeavor for the military. This reluctance was clearly revealed to the United States with General Paik's remark at the height of US–ROK tension in 1953, "the army will follow the orders of Korean President Syngman Rhee no matter what the UN decides" (Na 2006, 159).

On the other hand, Rhee's consolidated position and political resources allowed him to institute measures to prevent the military from falling into US hands. Most significant was creation of a security apparatus within the military, politically loyal to him and organizationally independent of the UNC. The Headquarters of Military Police, established in 1953, was particularly influential. It was

granted power to not only monitor high-ranking officers and thereby deeply involve in military promotion but also actively perform extrajudicial terrorization and even assassination on civilians to support Rhee's grip into power (Kim 2000, 45). Headed by General Won Yongduk, a Rhee loyalist, this “fragmented and exclusive security apparatus” promoted Rhee's control and monitoring capacity over the military and the society while bypassing the US chain of command (Greitens 2016, 215).

In sum, for Rhee in 1953, alliance institutionalization promised not only an additional major national security asset for war-torn and fragile ROK but entailed huge domestic material and legitimacy bonuses without much risk of weakening Rhee's control of the state. The US–ROK Mutual Security Agreement was finally signed in October 1953, and came into effect in 1954, also inheriting the highly institutionalized wartime combined command.

Factionalism, Kim and the DPRK–PRC Alliance after the Korean War

The PRC–DPRK combined military command was officially established in December 1950 to improve the effectiveness of their forces soon after China's entry into the Korean War. When the war ended, although the experiences and institutions of combined command promised significant deterrent value post-truce against a deeply revisionist opponent in the South, Kim defied the systemic requirement by terminating the combined command in 1953, withdrawing Chinese forces in 1958, and only to sign a minimal security treaty in 1961.

The contrasting choice to Rhee's can be traced to Kim's political situation in 1953. Kim faced significant challenges to the consolidation of power which his counterpart in the South did not, and from his perspective China's interests were not compatible with those of his own political well-being on any of the three dimensions of interest: domestic balance among factions, the legitimacy of his regime, or civil–military relations. It heavily weighed into Kim's alliance strategy—he refused to formalize any levels of security ties throughout the 1950s but switched his stance after successfully monopolizing the power by signing a minimal security treaty with incompatible China.

Kim's Halting Consolidation of Power

After years of anti-Japanese resistance in Manchuria and the Russian Far East, Kim returned to the newly liberated Korea in late 1945 with the Soviet supporting his bid for leadership in the communist North. However, politics in the early DPRK were fragmented and fluid, making his political position

precarious at best. In late 1945, three major parties existed within the Korean left, and the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) did not complete its domination of the other two until 1948 (Armstrong 2004, 107–35). More importantly, the legacies of the various groups of North Korean communists—Koreans who had spent their lives in the Soviet Union, the China-oriented "Yan'an faction," the domestic underground, and Kim's Soviet-leaning Manchurian guerilla faction—continued to shape DPRK politics during and after the Korean War (Lankov 2005, 3).

The most pressing factional divide was that between his own coterie and the Yan'an faction. Members of this faction held significant positions within the DPRK government. Veterans of the anti-Japanese war in China and of the Chinese civil war, the Yan'an group earned their title during exile in the PRC's western Shaanxi province, which was home to CCP headquarters in the city of the same name. Although Kim had himself joined the CCP during his career as an anti-Japanese guerilla in China's northeast near the Korean border, there was little love lost between the Chinese and Kim's group of Korean partisans, who were distinct from the Yan'an faction. Kim himself was arrested in 1933 amid purges that killed hundreds of Korean CCP members suspected of sympathizing with Japan in Manchuria (Armstrong 2004, 30). After the Japanese succeeded in crushing Kim's Chinese-led resistance guerilla forces in the northeast, he crossed into the Soviet far east and joined the Red Army in 1940, eventually becoming a captain (Armstrong 2004, 32). When the provisional government was established in 1946, Kim emerged as the leader primarily with the support of his Manchurian guerrilla compatriots, not that of the Yan'an faction or those Koreans who had lived in the USSR throughout the multi-decade Japanese occupation of Korea.

Factional struggle therefore continued before and during the war, and though Kim made gains in his drive to consolidate power, he had yet to fully succeed by 1953. Internal struggle at the war's close remained very serious. A major figure in the Soviet faction and former no. 2 official in the Party hierarchy, Aleksei Hegai (Ho Ka-i), was found shot dead just a few weeks before the war's end, which many suspected to be an assassination disguised as suicide. Then, fewer than two weeks after the signing of the armistice, twelve members of Park Heon-Yeong's South Korean Workers' Party faction were arrested, including Park himself, who Kim would have executed after a three-year prison term. Political struggle was hardly settled when the war ended, however. The top party positions were divided by multiple factions. And only five of the eleven top politicians could be considered as Kim's loyalists in 1953 (Scalapino and Lee 2017, 207–14).

Anything but Alliance

At the conclusion of the Korean War, Kim's power was unconsolidated and therefore together with a presence of powerful Yan'an faction, continuing the wartime security ties was not compatible with Kim's more immediate domestic political goals and position. In fact, Kim's reluctance to involve China in the Korean War was manifest even before the war. Beijing was deliberately left out of Pyongyang–Moscow discussions on specific war plans and was informed of the invasion decision only a month before (Agov 2013, 232). Once the war began, Kim repeatedly rebuffed Mao's offer of military assistance and only changed the stance when the UN forces began an offensive in the North in late 1950. Similarly, contrary to Rhee's voluntary surrender of military command to the United States, Kim initially refused to submit Korea People's Army (KPA) to Peng Dehuai, a CPVA commander, and only grudgingly agreed to it after learning that Stalin approved forming a combined command ("Telegram from Mao Zedong to Peng Dehuai" 1950).

When the war ended in 1953, the schism was equally intense, if not deeper. The war efforts under the combined command, while achieving the primary objective of saving the Kim's regime, meant a series of disagreements over the strategic objectives, military planning and logistics, and the issues over the demarcation line and the prisoners of war during the armistice negotiations (Shen 2003).

Under these circumstances, it made sense for Kim to discontinue the combined command structure and not to open negotiation about forming an alliance with Beijing the way Rhee was doing at that time with Washington. Any formalization of the security ties with China would have undermined the Kim's authority and legitimacy in multiple ways. It would have served as a constant reminder of the critical role of Chinese assistance in the North's darkest hour, thereby undermining Kim's own claim as defender and savior of the DPRK, while emboldening political authority and legitimacy of Yan'an faction. Despite successfully removing key Yan'an-affiliated cadres such as Mu-Chong during the war, Yan'an faction was represented in the top party circles including Kim Tu-bong and Choi Chang-ik (Scalapino and Lee 2017, 207). Yan'an faction was also "one of the three core founding members" of the KPA and retained its influence in 1953 (Chung and Choi 2013, 246; Kim 2018, 51–54).

Kim deeply feared the rise of Yan'an faction and regarded its members such as Kim Ung and Park Il Woo as Mao's men (Kim 2018, 215). Such fear was not groundless. When Kim demoted an earlier Yan'an rival, Pak Il-u during the war, for example, Pak is alleged to have complained how Kim made such a decision without Mao Zedong's approval (Chung and Choi 2013, 247). Under such circumstances, creating formal channels for the Chinese over the elite politics and the KPA was not

only at odd with, but also detrimental to Kim's immediate goal of recovering and rebuilding his powerbase in North Korea. In particular, Kim's aggressive purge of rivals in the aftermath of the war strongly points that Kim was prioritizing regime security in his mind. Broadly aligned with the theoretical expectation, Kim swiftly terminated the wartime combined command and never explored a possibility of alliance, let alone institutionalization throughout the 1950s.

Centralizing Power in the 1950s

Kim's initial purge focused on the leaders of domestic factions led by Park Heon Young. By contrast, desperate for outside assistance for postwar reconstruction, Pyongyang was largely in friendly terms with Moscow and Beijing, which offered large sums of "fraternal assistance," which accounted for 80 percent of its industrial reconstruction needs in 1954–1956 (Armstrong 2004, 55–59; Cathcart and Kraus 2011). The uncomfortable marriage of convenience eventually came to an end, however, when the split between Kim's supporters and the Yan'an faction finally came to a head. As the shockwaves of Khrushchev's secret speech rolled through the socialist camp and the criticism of the cult of personality inspired challenges to "little Stalins" in numerous Communist countries, a group of Yan'an-affiliated cadres chose to make their move.

In August 1956, highly ranked DPRK officials associated with the Yan'an faction launched a verbal attack on Kim at the KWP Central Committee, trying to convince the Central Committee to restrain or replace the leader. As Kim probably have suspected for long, partially declassified Soviet records show that the Yan'an faction was in repeated contact with Soviet leaders regarding the impending attempt to criticize and possibly "undertake certain actions" against Kim in July 1956 (Person 2006, 33–35). Contemporaneous Chinese records have not yet been opened, but it seems unlikely that the conspirators would have gone ahead without consulting its Chinese allies and securing its approval, who later swiftly granted political asylum to the four fleeing dissenters (Lankov 2002, 187).

The overthrow attempt proved disastrous. Kim swiftly and aggressively launched counterattacks on the charges made by the anti-Kim conspirators who miscalculated an amount of support and loyalty Kim had enjoyed from broad spectrum within the KWP, which even included parts of Yan'an and Soviet factions. Kim eventually outmaneuvered them and contained their attempt to gain the support of other Committee members. Four of his opponents escaped to China, whence the story of the attempted rebellion came to the outside world. The rest were purged from their positions and the party.

The Chinese response to the August incident indicated their broader displeasure with Kim's style of rule and Soviet records show that Mao himself had “livened up” and conveyed that the comrades from KWP saw the situation in the party “in very grim colors” to Anastas Mikoyan during the Soviet leader's visit to Beijing just weeks after events in Pyongyang (“Cable from Cde. Mikoyan from Beijing Concerning the 8th CCP Congress and Conversations with the Chinese Comrades” 1956). Kim's lack of a fully consolidated power base in the mid-1950s thus actively impeded his value as a reliable client. Kim seemed to acknowledge this himself by slow-walking the punishment of his Yan'an adversaries in order to avoid upsetting relations with China and the USSR still further (Lankov 2002). Cognizant of the potential threats from China's meddling with DPRK's civil–military relations, Kim launched a second round of purge of Yan'an faction military elites including Chang Pyung-San and Kim Ung after the withdrawal of Chinese forces in 1958 (Choi 2008, 325). By then, Kim emerged victorious and effectively enjoyed uncontested politics, with his Manchurian guerrillas and other loyal supporters occupying all the top positions in the North Korean party-state by the late 1950s (Choi 2008, 326).

Toward Friendship Treaty

The successful purge of rival factions and Beijing's acceptance of Kim's dictatorial power allowed Kim to define his relations with Mao not in the party-to-party context but by state-to-state relations on which the characteristics of security ties could be redefined (Choi 2008, 326). In other words, power consolidation rendered Pyongyang's foreign policy relatively free of domestic political constraints and more responsive to the security and strategic considerations.

The security conditions still rationalized formalizing alliance relations, if not more. After signing a densely institutionalized military alliance with Seoul in 1953, Washington signaled its expanded commitment to the region by concluding a defense treaty with Taiwan in December 1954 and a revised defense treaty with Japan in January 1960. At the same time, South Korean military was growing fast under the US material support and military guidance throughout the 1950s. By contrast, Pyongyang's raw aggregate military power was reduced with the withdrawal of CPVA in 1958. To further the sense of heightened security tension, a moderate government in the South that succeeded Rhee was overthrown in May 1961 by a military coup led by Major General Park Chung-hee. Park had the emissary secretly sent by Kim arrested and executed shortly after seizing the power, hardly a reassuring gesture to Pyongyang (Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 8).

At the same time, however, Pyongyang could not trust Beijing as a fully reliable security partner due to the recent memories of tensions with Beijing during and after the war. In fact, Kim learnt the Chinese intent to remove him from power in 1956, a revelation made by Mikoyan, who wanted to drive a wedge between Pyongyang and Beijing amid the Sino-Soviet split, during his visit to Moscow in June 1960(Armstrong 2013, 124). North Korea launched a campaign to promote independence from foreign interference and officially criticized the practice of *sadaejuui* (flunkeyism), or roughly translated as serving and relying on foreign power, including during the KWP Central Committee in October 1960 (Armstrong 2013, 122). Kim himself clearly understood the dangers of overly relying on the ostensible allies, later describing the 1956 coup attempt in precisely these terms (emphasis added):

"… the anti-Party revisionist elements within the Party came out to attack the Party, taking advantage of the complicated situation and with the backing of outside forces. The anti-Party elements within the Party *and their supporters abroad, revisionists and big-power chauvinists*, joined forces in opposition to our Party and carried on conspiratorial activities to overthrow the leadership of our Party and government" (Kim 1972, 28).

Hence, Kim in the early 1960s is best described as a mix of power consolidation and political incompatibility. The security situations continued to demand extracting external sources of additional security. Kim was able to prioritize it due to his consolidated power, but the political incompatibility with China made it necessary to minimize any ties that may backfire against his newly established absolute control over the KWP and KPA. North Korea did finally sign new separate bilateral military treaties with the Soviet Union and China in 1961. The DPRK–PRC defense treaty enhanced the external defense and deterrence for Pyongyang by pledging to "immediately render military and other assistance by all means" in the face of an armed attack. The treaty, however, was devoid of any provisions for institutionalized cooperation and neither did military–military interaction come near the institutionalizing characteristic evident south of the thirty-eighth parallel. Equally importantly, the Article V stipulated "the principle of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in each other's internal affairs…," whose subtext probably pointed to the troubling memories of the August Incident in 1956 (Choi 2008). Overall, the 1961 treaty was an alliance without institutionalization, balancing between meeting security needs, on the one hand, and containing the domestic dangers, on the other hand.

Throughout the 1950s, Kim's domestic need to consolidate power was inextricable from the trilateral politics of the Soviet–Sino–Korean relationship, with significant DPRK political factions linked to

both ostensible allies, and he had reason to suspect at various points that both the Soviets and the Chinese might wish to see him replaced. In this sense, formalizing alliance relations would have made little sense to Kim, whatever the apparent strategic incentives of the Cold War. Only when he finally consolidated power, Kim pursued alliances with the Soviet Union and China without institutionalization, designed to enhance his national security while containing sources of potential domestic backlash.

Future Research

In this paper, we explained how domestic political consequences, defined by political compatibility and power consolidation, are often central to what leaders consider and prioritize when deciding whether to form tight or loose alliance structures. The divergent choices that Kim and Rhee Syngman made regarding the wartime integrated command show strong support for the domestic origins of alliance design. The overall findings indicate several avenues for future research in the general alliance literature.

First, building on the distinct logic of a client's preference formation on alliance designs, further research can inquire into how the final structure of an alliance is determined in the presence of competing preferences between the patron and the client. In other words, while we account for why Rhee and Kim's preferences diverged, their preferences alone did not determine the fate of wartime alliances—after all, the initially reluctant United States also gradually saw incentives to keep tight control over the unpredictable and audacious Rhee's North Korea policy via an institutionalized alliance arrangement, while mass-scale economic programs at home made China's military presence and economic assistance to North Korea increasingly burdensome. More generally, alliance theory can benefit further from studying whether an outcome of the patron–client interaction varies across other contextual variables such as regime type, external security environment, or sociological proximity. In that respect, a fruitful research avenue exists to trace the interactive patron–client bargaining processes that lead to specific designs of alliances, but perhaps with other patron–client alliances that emerged and evolved under different strategic settings from the US–ROK and PRC–DPRK relations of the 1950s.

Second, another engaging area for future research is to evaluate whether the two alliances functioned as the client leaders had intended—more specifically, Rhee's intention to use the institutionalized alliance relations to bolster his domestic powerbase and legitimacy and Kim's to minimize room for

China's alignment with rival factions, and China's influence in regime politics in general. Similar to the points raised above, such an inquiry could involve other alliance cases, aiming to probe if intended effects approximate actual practice in military alliances, or whether alliances evolve in unintended ways.

Third, although a growing body of literature recognizes and elaborates how the intra-regime concerns condition various policy areas germane to national security (Talmadge 2016; Fravel 2018), the role of domestic politics still tends to be treated as secondary to states' strategic calculus. The experiences of the two Koreas in the 1950s add further caution against the predisposition toward system-level explanation found in much of the realist literature, especially in the study of small and insecure countries. Continuing the revived interest in the intersection between regime and national security, future studies could explore the applicability of the two-step framework outlined in this paper to other dimensions of national security areas such as military reform, civil–military relations, crisis management, and others.

Finally, this paper reveals that there are multiple dimensions of alliances that still require further explanation. Though research on alliances has generated a voluminous literature, studies of alliance formation dynamics command the overwhelming share and other dimensions such as evolution or termination remain underdeveloped. This issue points to the need to identify, compare, and analyze the different paths that alliances take at various points during alliance life cycles, and whether and how domestic political variables interfere with these choices in ways consistent with, or distinct from, the ways that power consolidation and political compatibility influenced the alliance designs at their inception.

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Notes

Inwook Kim is the corresponding author and comes from the Republic of Korea.
Jackson Woods is from the United States of America. He holds a PhD in Political Science from George Washington University and was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for the Study of Contemporary China at the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently a Program Manager in application security at Microsoft.

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