



Transnational militarism and ethnic nationalism: South Korean involvements in the Vietnam and Iraq wars

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ABSTRACT

Using South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars as case studies, we explore transnational militarism as a salient (often neglected) force of globalization that has shaped the construction and modification of national identity. Building on the theoretical framework of 'militarized modernity' and insights from critical studies of militarism, we examine the effect of two features of transnational militarism on the construction of South Korea's sense of a national 'we': discursive representation of national interest in participating in these wars and actual and imagined encounters with 'Others' mediated by transnational militarism. We argue that while the Vietnam War participation was instrumental to the construction of the anticommunist, capitalist, and militarized nation in the context of the Cold War, the Iraq War participation a generation later contributed to the emergence of a cosmopolitan nationalism that challenged the views from the Cold War era. We identify South Korea's citizen-led democratization as a major contributing factor for different modes of engagements with transnational wars, in association with shifting geopolitics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 June 2020
Accepted 8 January 2021

KEYWORDS

Militarized Modernity;
transnational Militarism;
vietnam War; iraq War;
ethnic Nationalism

South Korea's involvements in the Vietnam War (1955–73) and the Iraq War (2003–8) have troublesome similarities. They represent South Korea's explicit transnational military engagement outside of its own national boundaries. Both were US-led wars that were controversial yet South Korea dispatched a large number of troops. South Korean troops constituted the second largest foreign armed forces in the Vietnam War after US troops and the third largest during the Iraq War after the United States and Great Britain. The South Korean government, under the Park Chung Hee administration (r. 1963–79) and Roh Moo Hyun administration (r. 2003–7), respectively, justified dispatching troops in terms of 'national interests' (*kugik*). There are also notable differences between the involvements. The Vietnam War participation was instrumental to articulating militarized anticommunist ethnic

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This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article. Seungsook Moon's research for the Iraq War participation was funded by 2019 Elinor Nims Brink Fund, Faculty Research Grant at Vassar College, and the Academy of Korean Studies Global Lab Research Grant (2018-2023). For research assistance, I would like to express my special gratitude to Ms Ok-ran Jang at the National Defence University in Seoul, Ms Mikyung Kang at Yenching Institute at Harvard University, and Ms Ji Eun Paek at Yonsei University. Nora Hui-Jung Kim's research was funded by the Academy of Korean Studies Global Lab Research Grant (2018-2023).

nationalism. Public debate was muffled and the national identity was dictated by a top-down state ideology under Park's dictatorship. In contrast, a democratized South Korea spoke more openly about participation in the Iraq War with debates for and against it. The opposition discourse affected the military operation on the ground and allowed Koreans to reflect on the Vietnam War-era view of a militarized state nationalism. Vocal and visible opposition to the Iraq War signalled the emergence of what we call cosmopolitan nationalism.

Building on the theoretical framework of 'militarized modernity' (Moon 2005) and insights from critical studies of the military, militarism, and war, this article explores transnational militarism as a salient (often neglected) force of globalization that has shaped the construction and modification of national identity. We examine the transnational migration of people as soldiers and refugees and the effect of these encounters, actual and imagined, on the construction of South Korea's sense of a national 'we'. We also analyse the discursive linkage between transnational war participation and 'national interests' and demonstrate how such public discourse reveals the contentious politics of national identity construction. First, we define the major concepts of transnational militarism and ethnic nationalism with its variations that are central to building national identity. Then, we examine the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, respectively. Each account covers two themes: (1) discourse on South Korea's participation in the wars vis-à-vis its national interests and (2) recollection of encounters during the two wars. We utilize various types of archival data, personal memoirs, policy reports, newspaper articles, speech transcripts, as well as scholarly articles.

Transnational militarism and ethnic nationalism: migration, discourse, and nation-building

We introduce the concept of transnational militarism to illuminate what studies of contemporary globalization has largely obscured in terms of its effects on social hierarchy and unequal power relations. These studies have aptly highlighted how the spread of capitalism generated transnational flows of labour, capital, technology, ideas and images. Yet few studies have viewed these flows from the perspective of militarism despite ample evidence that military relations and activities since World War II have produced flows of those crucial resources across national borders. We define transnational militarism as a set of ideas and practices which normalize war preparation and war waging by relying on the transnational flows of the crucial resources. The Vietnam and Iraq Wars exemplify transnational militarism interacting with ethnic nationalism in the Cold War and the post-Cold War eras, respectively.

In the Cold War world order, despite apparent decolonization and popularized rhetoric of national sovereignty, the US and the USSR functioned as de facto empires controlling their junior partners in strategic and political relations. Studies of US involvements in Asia and Latin America capture transnational workings of military and political relations involving the flows of human labour, technology, and other resources across national borders (Man 2018; Ware 2012; Baldoz 2011; Gill 2004). While not featured in this body of studies, the South Korea-US military alliance has been largely neocolonial and has resulted in transnational migration of various social groups and other resources. After the declaration of a 'new world order' by the Sr. Bush's administration (r. 1982-92), the post-Cold War era began ironically with the Gulf War, displaying unrivalled American military power through the 'shock and awe' operation.

Clinton's administration (r. 1992–2000) embraced the rhetoric and practices of UN multinational forces in the Balkan War and other 'low-intensity conflicts' in the world. This marked an important ideological departure from the Cold War rhetoric of defending democracy against communism to the post-Cold War rhetoric of 'peacekeeping' and 'reconstruction'. In this shifting global geopolitics, South Korea continues to function as a sub-empire performing surrogate military labour for US-led wars. As we analysed below, while the content of military labour performed by Korean soldiers changed over time, their involvement in the two transnational wars led to articulations of different versions of ethnic nationalism.

Critical studies of the military, militarism, and war have shown their complex roles in constructing, maintaining, modifying, and undoing collective identities. Feminist scholarship on these issues has highlighted the politics of gender and sexuality along with the intersectionality of ethnicity/race, and class (Wibben 2018; Moon 2015; Belkin 2012; Hoehn and Moon 2010; Enloe 2007).¹ Other studies have focused on the politics of ethnic or national identities (Åse 2020; Mosse 1990). Illuminating the relational and political nature of these social categories, insights from these studies enable us to examine how South Korean participation in the Vietnam and Iraq Wars generated migration and encounters structured by ethnicity/race, class, and gender.² We bring this literature into dialogue with the study of militarized modernity. In her groundbreaking work, Seungsook Moon (2005) defines militarized modernity as 'a sociopolitical and economic formation' characterized by the militarized construction and maintenance of the anti-communist nation, the making of members of the nation through discipline and violence, and the integration of men's military service into the organization of the industrializing economy. Her study argues that militarism, expressed in men's conscription and war preparation against communist North Korea, served as a central mechanism for building the modern nation. Drawing on this analysis, we approach the Vietnam and Iraq Wars as *transnational* processes of militarized modernity. Transnational military involvements entail not only soldiering and other related military labour but also public debates over the involvements. We incorporate this type of discourse into our analysis as an essential cultural vehicle through which ethnic/national identity is articulated. Discursive encounters between South Koreans and ethnic/racial others across national boundaries in war mobilization constitute the processes of making and remaking national identity. Differing from physical mobilization, discursive mobilization still affected Korean civilians psychologically and compels them to engage with the moral and existential questions: What sort of a nation is South Korea and what sort of a political community is it to be? The Vietnam and Iraq Wars provided opportunities for South Koreans to face these questions but the differing domestic and global contexts of these wars led to a top-down monotonic version of national 'we' for the former and more contentious debates over national identity construction for the latter. We define the top-down version of nationalism during the Vietnam War era as state nationalism and an alternative to this emerging from the opposition discourse during the Iraq War as cosmopolitan nationalism. Applying Anthony Appiah's concept of 'cosmopolitan patriotism' (Appiah 1997), we define this version of ethnic nationalism as a set of ideas and practices for promoting an independent nation that acknowledges dignity of all persons within and beyond one's national borders, while simultaneously taking pride in the nation that one is primarily

rooted in. For a cosmopolitan nationalist, a nation's capability to emphasize with strangers to the nation is a sign of maturity and a source of national pride.

The Vietnam war: building a capitalist nation at the periphery of the world

In the course of the Vietnam War, Park Chung Hee's administration dispatched a total of 320,000 Korean soldiers to Vietnam (Han 2006). The first combat troop development was in February 1965, and by late 1969, there were approximately 50,000 South Korean troops actively engaged in combat in South Vietnam along also with approximately 15,000 civilian employees of American and South Korean companies (Kim 1970, 519). South Korea started troop withdrawal in 1972 and completed it by 1973. After the fall of Saigon in May 1975, approximately 1,500 evacuees returned to South Korea and about the same number of Vietnamese refugees stayed at the refugee camp in Busan, South Korea, between 1977 and 1992 (Nho 2013).

Combating communism and combating poverty

South Korea's decision to send troops to Vietnam was surprising; only a decade prior South Korea ceased its own civil war with North Korea and its people were struggling from the destruction of their livelihood from the Korean War. To understand South Korea's decision to send troops, we need to understand what motivated Park Chung Hee (r. 1963–1979) to make such decision. As a military dictator of a recently independent country with feeble institutional structure and war-torn economy, Park played a central role in building modern South Korea (for more detailed discussion on Park's role, see Jager 2003; Kim 2004, Moon 2005). After seizing the power via a military coup, Park had faced a legitimacy crisis and was seriously concerned about losing support from the U.S. on whom South Korea heavily relied economically and militarily. With memories of the Korean War still vivid among the populace, the reduction of US troops in the Korean Peninsula was a paramount concern for Park (Hong 2009). He explained this concern in the following speech:

When Washington and Saigon asked us to send troops, we didn't have to if we didn't want to. But then Washington would have sent two US army divisions from Korea to Vietnam Do you think the US would send its troops back to South Korea if North Korea did invade us again? Probably not. Therefore, we didn't have much choice but to send our troops for the sake of our own national security.³

As indicated in this speech, South Korea's military reliance on the US was instrumental to South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War and the same was true more than a generation later in sending troops to the Iraq War. Knowing Park's fear of US troop reduction in South Korea, Winthrop G. Brown, then US ambassador to South Korea, 'implicitly pressured [the Park administration] by alluding that the US would take troops out of Korea to send them to Vietnam' (IMH (Institute of Military History) 1996, 175). In 1965, after returning from a state visit to the US, Park submitted a troop dispatch bill to the National Assembly of Korea for approval (Hong 2009, 223).

When Park, a military dictator, had decided to send the troops, it was foregone conclusion before discursive justification began. The Vietnam War discourse comprises

three themes: paying the debt of the Korean War to the United States, combating communism, and combating poverty (Han 2006; Hong 2009; Park 2006, 2007, 2011). Sending troops to Vietnam was justified as a way to pay back the military debt to the U.S. Park reminded South Korean soldiers that ‘they were the crusaders of freedom similar to our comrades of the free world who helped us during the Korean War’.⁴ Utilizing widespread anticommunist sentiment among South Koreans of the time, Park also argued that sending Korean troops would prevent the ‘domino effect’ of communism. He warned that ‘if we fail to protect South Vietnam from communist aggression, it is just a matter of time before we will lose all of Southeast Asia, and I can also say that the security of South Korea will be also questionable’.⁵ According to this logic, the frontline of national defence against communism was extended to Indochina and participating in a transnational war was aligned with the national interest of militarized security.

The ‘domino effect’ was an ideological tool that made the Vietnam War a key mechanism in consolidating anticommunism as one of the defining characteristics of South Korean national identity. But anticommunism also functioned as a basis of another discursive justification for the Vietnam War participation – combating poverty. Park Chung Hee merged combating communism with combating poverty, as expressed in his special message to the workers in Vietnam.

There are two types of wars being waged in Vietnam and other parts of Asia. One is fought with [military] force to guard against invasion The other is fought with social and economic revolutions so that citizens can live a decent life. While South Korean soldiers, along with those of South Vietnamese and the US, are helping Vietnam to achieve the first, you [workers in Vietnam] are assisting with the second goal, which is as important as the first.⁶

Park described workers as ‘industrial soldiers’ and thereby connected waging war in Vietnam to economic development in South Korea (Yoon 2012, 297). The line between military soldiers and ‘industrial soldiers’ blurred not only figuratively but also literally during the Vietnam War as South Korean soldiers who ended their tour often stayed in Vietnam and worked for private companies. The strategy of mobilizing workers as ‘industrial soldiers’ continued to be a core element of ‘militarized modernity’ during the 1970s and 1980s (Moon 2005, chap. 2).

Unlike the ‘indebtedness’ or ‘anticommunism’ themes mentioned in government documents early on, the economic benefits of participation were not initially discussed (Ma 2013). But economic benefits and combating poverty became the most effective and consequential discursive justifications as they were directly tied ‘national interests’ with individual mobility. The effect of the Vietnam War on Korean economic development is indisputable; the money from offshore procurement contracting and the Military Assistance Program transfers counted for 40% to 60% of Korea’s gross capital formation during the Vietnam War (Glassman and Choi 2014, 1175). The average growth rate between 1965 and 1969 doubled from the rate in the previous five years (Jeong 2000, 132). The Vietnam War further shaped the Korean economy by laying the groundwork for the development of Korean-style conglomerates, *chaebol*. Hyundai, for example, transformed itself into one of the world’s largest construction companies by building military houses and highways in Vietnam under the guidance of US military engineers (Glassman and Choi 2014, 1171). The Park Chung Hee administration played an active role in making the Vietnam War an opportunity for *chaebols*. The Minister of Foreign

Affairs attended the fourth troop-contributing countries' meeting, held in Saigon in July 1970, with a special request from the Bureau of Economic Planning to negotiate 'priorities to be given to South Korean companies for the construction projects in the areas where South Korean troops had been stationed' (C1-0023-06/3510/723.3XB, 64). As such, the Vietnam War served as a cradle for South Korean *chaebols* and for South Korea to reposition itself as 'subempire' in Asia (Lee 2009).

Significant economic 'benefits' came from South Korean soldiers' salaries from the 'money for men' agreement with the United States (Baldwin 1975, 36). This is one reason why South Korean troops stayed the longest, even after all US troops had been withdrawn (Park 2007). The bodies of the Korean soldiers literally bought Korean capitalist accumulation and one should scrutinize who those soldiers were. In forming the first round of combat troops, the Park administration selected approximately 18,000 soldiers from those already serving their military duty. Initially, South Korean soldiers equated a tour of Vietnam as a tour of never returning alive, and many soldiers deserted their units or resorted to self-inflicted injuries to avoid being drafted (Yoon 2012, 303). By the time the Park administration was ready to send its second combat troops, however, most of the troops consisted of volunteers. Changed attitudes towards the Vietnam War came in part because of the mass mobilization drive, which touted soldiers as the embodiment of 'the bravery of Korean manhood to the world' (Lee 2009, 659). But what really motivated the volunteers were the potential earnings, which recruiting officials did not fail to emphasize (Yoon 2010). Pay levels for enlisted men were 22 times that of regular Korean military pay (Glassman and Choi 2014, 1166). Men from rural and working-class backgrounds were particularly attracted to this dangerous, yet gainful, employment. It is telling that the Korea International Development Agency, which arranged emigration of miners and nurses to Germany for economic development, was in charge of deploying South Korean soldiers to Vietnam. We see a similar logic of 'military proletarianization' (Lee 2009) in the deployment for the Iraq War.

The National Assembly swiftly approved the Park administration's bill to send non-combat troops in July 1964, citing Korean War indebtedness as a main reason (Ma 2013, 71). When the administration sent another bill to the National Assembly in early January 1965 to deploy combat troops, a few assemblymen objected with concerns that sending combat troops would weaken the already insufficient defence against North Korea. But the dissenting assemblymen changed their minds after meeting with Ambassador Brown and the National Assembly passed the bill on 26 January with 106 Yeas, 11 Nays, and 8 absentees. By the time the third round of deployment was on the table in July 1965, there were fewer dissenting voices and assembly discussions focused mostly on how South Korea could secure more material benefits (Ma 2013, 75). With Ambassador Brown assuring South Korea's share of economic benefits behind the scene, the bill passed on August 13 with 101 yeas, 1 nay, and 2 absentees (Han 2006, 256). The media contributed to muffled opposition to the Vietnam War. Under tight government scrutiny, the media were not allowed to publish the number of South Korean troops killed in action (Han 2006, 262). Instead, they reported victorious achievements by South Korean troops. The hegemonic value of national interest, narrowly defined as economic development and securing military alliance between South Korea and the United States, muted debates regarding the nature of the Vietnam War and justification of South Korea's participation. In later debates on the Iraq War deployment, national interest

continues to be a primary justification for deciding South Korea's participation in these 'wars of choice'.

War encounters and reproduction of global hierarchy

The Vietnam War produced encounters among US, South Vietnamese, and South Korean soldiers, workers, and refugees that amplified existing racial and geopolitical hierarchies. The Johnson administration realized the advantage of South Korean troops as Asians racially similar to the Vietnamese (Park 2006, 157). South Korean soldiers in Vietnam helped counter the genocidal image of war committed by whites against Asians. But the encounters during the war amplified existing racial and class designations of South Korean soldiers as part of the 'other'. US delegates complained that the Park administration was 'begging for more money', making 'extremely irrational and unfair' demands, and seeming to consider 'South Korean troops in Vietnam as if they are Aladdin's lamp' (telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State; cited in Park 2006, 164). In battle, US commanders complained that 'South Koreans are not engaging in combat. They must have come here just for fun' and argued the US should take over the Wartime Operation Control from South Korea (IMH (Institute of Military History) 1996, 201). When the *New York Times* exposed South Korean troops' brutality against Vietnamese civilians, the US argued that 'it was a policy error that the Koreans were allowed to operate in Vietnam without operational command, either directed by the Americans or by some united command' (C-0040-10/3502/722.6VT, 20). The image of South Korean soldiers here is that of inferior and undisciplined troops needing to be controlled. In the same report, the US commander states 'evidence of South Korean brutality in 1968 ... was strong enough to upset some [US] commanders' such that they ordered 'Korean officers to watch lower-level actions' (C-0040-10/3502/722.6VT, 21). The depiction of US commanders as more civilized and humane trying unsuccessfully to discipline savagery in South Korean soldiers reproduced and reinforced the global and racial hierarchy between the United States and South Korea.

The Vietnam War produced encounters between South Koreans and Vietnamese as well. South Korean troops selectively embraced the label of Asian. A report by the Institute of Military History (IMH) noted that South Korean troops were quick to secure trust from the South Vietnamese civilians because 'Koreans are also Asians and have the same skin tone as the Vietnamese' (IMH (Institute of Military History) 1996, 191). The same report also described South Vietnamese troops as 'stubborn and strong willed' (IMH (Institute of Military History) 1996, 186) as well as 'ungrateful and even hostile towards the US to the extent that the US started to feel skeptical about helping the Vietnamese out' (IMH (Institute of Military History) 1996, 141). This depiction of Vietnamese as ungrateful and disobliging is remarkably similar to US soldiers' characterizations of Vietnamese, as US soldiers complained about 'the generally poor fighting record of the South Vietnamese army ... , for they seemed to be fighting and dying for a people who would not fight for themselves' (Borstelmann 2001, 216). Likewise, South Korean soldiers reportedly used the term 'gook' to refer to Vietnamese soldiers (Borstelmann 2001; Nguyen 2016). South Korean troops were looked down upon by US troops, and they rarely challenged such hierarchy. But, by adopting US soldiers' views

on Vietnamese, South Korean soldiers positioned themselves as ‘subempire,’ inferior to Americans but superior to Vietnamese.

Encounters with the ‘other’ continued after the war ended in relations with refugees and evacuees. South Korea launched an evacuation mission and rescued approximately 1,500 South Koreans and their close allies after the fall of Saigon in May 1975. Vietnamese ‘boat people’ came to South Korea starting in 1977 and continued to arrive through the early 1990s, totalling about additional 1,500 refugees stayed in South Korea. The South Korean state dictated the terms and nature of encounters with these evacuees and refugees. Refugees were stationed in a camp in Busan, and it was a closed camp, where refugees were not only isolated from the rest of the city, but their living conditions resembled those of imprisonment. Refugees were not allowed to leave the camp or have visitors. However, they were frequently utilized as reminders to South Koreans of the threat of communism and the importance of a strong military. For example, a Vietnamese refugee spoke at an All Women’s Organization National Security Rally in July 1977 and reminded attendees that ‘a war must be won at any cost because there is no room for people who throw a white towel’ (cited in Nho 2014, 356). Refugees, especially those with military backgrounds, were recruited to join a national security awareness education team and toured schools with messages about anticommunism and strong military to keep Korea safe. This practice continued into the mid 1980s (Nho 2014, 357). In this sense, Vietnamese refugee figures helped build a militarized national identity based on anticommunism and justify continued military rule in South Korea. Indeed, Chun Doo Hwan (r. 1980–88) and Roh Tae Woo (r. 1988–93), the two successors of Park, both served as commanding officers of South Korean troops in Vietnam.

While the dearth of available data limits definitive analysis, works of Hwang Suk-Young, a novelist and Vietnam War veteran, such as *Pagoda* and *The Shadow of Arms*, hint that South Korea soldiers felt some empathy towards Vietnamese as fellow Asian neocolonial subjects under US empire (for discussion of Hwang’s works, see Hughes 2007). But, such empathy towards Vietnamese seems to be a minor view, as indicated by Yoon’s oral history project with Vietnam War veterans whose memories of the war seem to be aligned with the official narrative of the War as an anticommunist crusade and a golden opportunity for national development (Yoon 2007). The traumas of the Korean War and its similarities with the Vietnam War as Cold-War induced civil wars could be a reason for such lack of empathy. In addition, dictatorial regimes in South Korea did not allow discursive space needed to challenge the official narratives of either the Korean War or the Vietnam War. This contrasts with the view of Iraq War veterans, as we will see in the following section, for whom empathy is a primary theme.

Memory politics and building a militarized nation

The Vietnam War profoundly shaped South Korea’s national identity. Seven months after the first combat troops were dispatched to Vietnam, Park Chung Hee made the following speech.

[Y]ou soldiers are national treasures who enhance our national status in the world. You are the lifeline of our nation. You are our brothers and sons sharing the same bloodline. You embody our nation’s power. We are all you soldiers’ parents, brothers,

and sisters. Therefore, there cannot be any distinction between the military and civilians; there cannot be an inch of separation between the two.⁷

This hyperbolic statement presented an official version of militarized ethnic nationalism. This version of nationalism posits the military as the embodiment of the power of the nation, soldiers as national treasures, and members of the nation bound to their parents, brothers, and sisters. Such national images were constructed through selective forgetting and remembering during and after the Vietnam War. The brutal mass killing of civilians by South Korean troops went unnoticed (Yoon 2015), and the official discourse portrayed South Korean troops as caring figures and Vietnamese civilians as helpless and grateful to South Korean troops. Such representation persisted after the war as South Koreans postured as benevolent and generous protectors of the refugees. The Vietnam War as a war of choice can be integrated into the Korean national 'we' only through selective (mis)representations of 'us' as caring and benevolent guardians. As discussed below, a parallel dynamic is observed in the Iraq War.

The Vietnam War, South Korea's first explicit engagement in transnational militarism, reveals how the construction of national identity involves active forgetting as well as remembering. During the Vietnam War and after the fall of Saigon, the traumas of the Korean War were constantly conjured to justify troop deployment to Vietnam and an ever-increasing military presence in South Korea. Simultaneously, hundreds of Vietnamese wives who accompanied South Korean evacuees and settled in South Korea were erased from public memory (Nho 2013) and such forgetting helped maintain the image of an ethnically homogenous nation. The Vietnam War and the brutal killings of civilians by South Korean troops have been mostly effaced from South Korea's public memory. What lingers in South Korea's collective memory is the economic gain the Vietnam War brought to South Korea, which was resummoned during debates on whether to send troops to Iraq and tipped the scale in favour of sending (Park 2011). Through selective memory, South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War shaped South Korean nationalism as anticommunist and militaristic, which set the tone for the debates over the South Korean military deployment to Iraq.

The Iraq war: contesting the capitalist and militaristic nation

South Korea did not volunteer to join the Iraq War but felt pressured to do so. Initially, South Korea dispatched engineering corps and medical service corps in Nasiriyah, 225 miles southeast of Baghdad, at a smaller scale (Editor 2007). Responding to the US demand for additional military, a new Korean military division, named *Zaytun*, was created. *Zaytun* refers to an Arabic word for olive, a common and essential food ingredient in Iraqi meals, which also symbolizes peace. Korea was one of twenty-seven countries in the Multinational Forces (MNF). For four years and three months between 2004 and 2008, South Korea sent approximately 3,600 soldiers annually and maintained an annual presence of roughly 19,000 in Iraq (National Defense Journal 2008, 74). While soldiers of the Vietnam War were sent off and welcomed with fanfare, soldiers of this war departed and returned in secrecy without public ceremony because four-time extensions of the deployment generated enduring criticism and opposition (Yi 2008).

Given this backdrop of domestic opposition, why did democratized South Korea decide to join the war? Korea's decision, especially under the 'progressive' administration

led by Roh Moo Hyun, a former human rights lawyer, cannot be understood without recognizing the gravity of US military hegemony in the region. In his address to a National Assembly meeting, Roh remarked, ‘Throughout my political career, I chose principles at each critical juncture and paid dearly with lost elections. ... However, I decided to send our troops. This is because the destiny of this nation and people depends on my decision’ (Special Planning Team 2007, 3). In subsequent press interviews, Roh implied he personally did not support the war but as president he was compelled to accommodate the US request (Roh 2003). Here we use his words and personal view not to psychologize but to underscore the geopolitical pressure internalized by the conservative populace that the head of the state came under. The Korean military contribution was considered inevitable necessity to ensure American military protection against North Korea in the context of its unpredictable nuclear threat. His decision also reflected how attitudes from the Vietnam War era persisted and dominated the sensibilities of the ruling institutions and the public, namely that national security hinged on US military protection.⁸

This dominant view has been challenged since South Korea’s political democratization in the 1990s. This change was symbolically represented by the contrast between Roh’s agonizing decision and Park’s willing decision. While both presidents linked Korea’s military contribution to the US-led wars to the US military protection of South Korea, the domestic and global contexts of their decisions were significantly different. Between the two wars, South Korea had transformed from a poor country under military dictatorship to an industrialized and democratized country. Democratization had started to challenge the state ideology of anticommunism and the image of the United States as a benevolent protector (Moon 2005, chap. 4) and to critique the government’s military decisions. Opposition to participation in the Iraq War was visible not only among progressive activists but also among political leaders in the National Assembly, political parties, and regular citizenry. This broad spectrum of opposition is a consequence of democratization, which heralded the emergence of an antiwar peace movement in South Korea. In 2002, prior to Roh’s election, an accidental killing of two middle-school girls by a US armoured vehicle during a military transfer prompted public outcry and reawakened memories of crimes against Koreans committed by GIs with impunity and galvanized anti-American public sentiments. Likewise public opposition to the Iraq War endured as Seon-il Kim, a Korean employee, was abducted and beheaded right after the decision to dispatch the Korean military to Iraq and American abuses of Abu Ghraib prisoners were exposed. The debates for and against war participation transpired in the context of democratized Korea questioning the US hegemonic status for the first time.

Public discourse and the Iraq war: the emergence of cosmopolitan nationalism

Public debates before and during the Korean participation in the war articulated various reasons for supporting and opposing it. Examining the metanarratives underlying the debates over South Korea’s involvement in the Iraq War reveals competing interpretations of how to build and develop a nation and its collective sense of identity. The pro-involvement discourse echoes Park Chung Hee’s militarized modernity, promoting the capitalist, militarized nation at all cost, while the anti-involvement discourse challenges such by promoting what we call cosmopolitan nationalism. As defined above, this emergent nationalism prioritizes ethical

consideration for dignity of other nationalities and empathy with them over economic development.

The supportive discourse revolves around the notion of national interests (*kugik*).⁹ Iraq War participation would promote national interests, interpreted as military security, economic benefits, Korea's status in the world, and military capacity. Military security vis-à-vis North Korea would be maintained or strengthened by supporting the US war, which in turn would ensure the US commitment to protecting South Korea. The subtext of this argument suggests South Korea could not refuse the US demand for its military contribution when it expected the US military protection against North Korea. War participation would yield economic opportunities to sell Korean products, technology, and labour in Iraq's postwar reconstruction business. Given that Iraq had the second largest oil reserve in the world after Saudi Arabia, Korea could gain better access to this critical resource (Ministry of Defense 2014, 207–8). South Korea's national status would rise through the recognition of its contribution to the MNF. Such contribution would be suitable for Korea with the eleventh largest economy in the world (at the time of the war). War participation would enhance the Korean military's capability through working with advanced military forces in actual war situations.

The centrality of national interests to the supportive discourse reaffirms the capitalist, militarized nation. It also adheres to the global norm of statecraft, including rational calculation of how to maximize and prioritize advantage of war situations. The pro-involvement discourse justified four-time extensions of military deployment in Iraq in terms of actual and potential economic opportunities. Officials of the Ministry of Defence mentioned that 'advanced' countries turn military deployment overseas into opportunities to promote national interests. They contended that if Zaytun Troop withdrew prematurely, the fruit of its hard work would be harvested by China, Turkey, and Germany (K. Kim 2007). Quickly learning from 'advanced' countries, in July of 2007, a consortium of 12 Korean businesses exchanged the Minutes of Understanding (MOU) with a local business for building the infrastructure in Iraq. The Korean Petroleum Public Corporation signed an MOU with the Kurdish Provincial Government to develop oil fields (Chön 2007, 3).

The opposition discourse revolves around the notion of just causes or moral justification (*myongbun*).¹⁰ Its main argument emphasizes that the war was a US invasion without just cause and that the US lied about its professed reasons for it; there were no weapons of mass destruction and no connection between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al-Qaeda. This discourse also questions the national interests to be promoted. Given widespread opposition to the war in the United States, Korea's refusal to participate in the war would not undermine the security alliance between the two countries. The discourse distinguished the neoconservative political leaders choosing the war from a majority of American citizens and political leaders supporting peace. It maintained that possible conflict with the current US government from the refusal to join the war would be temporary and could disappear as the presidential election altered US political leadership. It contended that economic benefits from the military deployment were more wishful thinking than likely outcome as deterioration of order and security in postwar Iraq continued and made economic opportunities tenuous at best. The more profitable deals would go to the United States first in any case. The opposition also pointed out that, unlike the Vietnam War participation, South Korea paid all expenses for its military operations in Iraq. It argued that Korea's status in the world would decline as a result of joining an immoral war, killing roughly 1.2 million Iraqis and generating 4 million Iraqi

refugees (E. Kim 2007, 77). Observing that the Iraq deployment generated hostility towards Koreans in the Middle East, the discourse stressed that such development would turn Koreans into targets of terrorism and undermine current and future economic and political opportunities in the region. Military experience gained from working with the MNF was not worth this level of loss and threat to Koreans (Suh 2014; E. Kim 2007).

Opposition discourse exhorts Koreans to imagine a nation beyond the logic of capitalism and militarism as is poignantly articulated by a critic: 'I would like to tell those Koreans who do not mind being remembered as an imperialist occupier. I can live in a country which does not produce a drop of petroleum but I don't want to live in a country where humane tears and blood do not exist' (E. Kim 2007, 82). This discourse envisions the Korean nation and a global community of nations as political entities with a moral compass at their foundations. From the cosmopolitan nationalist perspective, national development means gaining moral capacity to empathize with other nations as communities of human beings with dignity; at least a nation does not seek to profiteer other people's wartime suffering and destruction.

The voices of cosmopolitan nationalism sufficiently influenced the South Korean government (Jang 2015) such that it repeatedly stressed that despite US demands, it would not dispatch combat troops to Iraq and even when combat soldiers were sent, their primary tasks were peacekeeping and reconstruction dealing with civilian affairs. The Zaytun Troop was sent to Erbil in northeastern Iraq to carry out 'civilian affairs operations' in support of the US-led MNF. Erbil is the provincial capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, some 320 km from Baghdad. Given strong domestic opposition to the Iraq War, this location was chosen as less dangerous than the oil-rich south embroiled in sectarian violence and also as available to Korea as a junior partner in the transnational military operation (Ministry of Defense 2014, 207; Special Planning Team 2007). The troop ran a hospital within the Zaytun Camp to treat local patients and train medical interns and repaired kindergartens, orphanages, and elderly centres. It also operated a technical education centre to teach local people employable skills ranging from automobile repair, household appliance repair, and heavy equipment operation to computer use and baking (Special Planning Team 2007; Yi 2008). These activities modify and complicate the military's traditional identity constructed and maintained around combat activities. Official rhetoric during the Vietnam War glorified masculine bravery of Korean soldiers in combat while the Iraq War rhetoric highlighted the military's success in providing social services for Iraqi civilians, labour previously construed as feminized labour. The opposition discourse amplified such rhetoric by pushing the government and the military to justify the war participation as morally worthy.

Encounters with ethnic/racial others: cosmopolitan nationalism marked by empathy and national pride

Korean participation in the Iraq War led to encounters between Koreans and ethnic/racial others across power differentials, especially in the region of Erbil where South Korean troops provided local Kurds with military security and social services. A prominent theme recurring in Korean soldiers' writings about their experiences of the Iraq War is cosmopolitan empathy towards the Kurdish people.¹¹ These soldiers were of all ranks, ranging from privates to high-ranking officers. They empathized with the

local people's suffering and hardship from the war and with being marginalized without an independent state of their own. These soldiers drew on historical memories of Korean suffering and hardship caused by the Korean War and Japanese colonial rule. A staff sergeant imagines that Kurdish children he encountered 'must have felt the same way as our children who ran after American military jeeps to get chocolates and chewing gums in the destroyed land after the war'.¹² A captain recollects the local people with 'language, skin color, and culture so different from ours' but similar histories of 'foreign invasions, oppression, and war'.¹³ This empathetic identification extends beyond collective memory of the past to the present geopolitical peril that Iraqi Kurds and Koreans share as small nations surrounded by larger and more powerful countries.

South Korean military policy of promoting friendship and respectful treatment of local people allowed for cosmopolitan empathy to develop. Under the rubric of the Green Angel Operation's delivery of medical and social services to locals, Zaytun Troop carried out various fraternization activities. Using the slogan, 'We are friends', it organized a Korea-Kurd Friendship Day featuring sports games, performance of martial art and chorus, art therapy sessions with children, sharing meals, and singing and dancing together. The communication between Korean soldiers and local people, as some soldiers write, was done affectively through 'smiles, gestures, and warm hearts' (P. Yi 2017, 234). Formally, double translations were used from Korean to Arabic and Arabic to Kurdish. A few dozen civilian translators worked with translator-soldiers (Im 2004). A female doctoral candidate in Arabic language joined the Zaytun Troop and worked for 18 months in Erbil. She conveyed that 'it was most rewarding to see how the local people who did not know Korea got to know our country through our activities and treated us as their friends' (Yu 2008). The troop leadership made deliberate efforts to instruct Korean soldiers to respect local people and their culture (National Defense Journal 2008, 75; Ch'oi 2006, 197). Specifically, the soldiers were instructed not to throw aid materials and personal handouts at local people from running cars to avoid humiliating them. The historical memory of American soldiers' treatment of Koreans in the postwar era made this type of humiliation understandable to younger-generation Korean soldiers. In his special report on Zaytun Troop, a lieutenant colonel writes, '[these programs] show Korea's genuine conscience to humanity and we ought to give especially as a nation with memories of feeling cold and hungry in the past, a nation that understands the value of sharing because of our own suffering and a need to move beyond the new wealthy's crassness' (J. Kim 2008, 46–47).

Nonetheless, cosmopolitan empathy does not erase unequal power relationships between Korean soldiers and the local people in the global geopolitics under the US military hegemony. Hence, empathy is interwoven with a sense of Korean pride at overcoming hardship and sometimes with paternalism towards the 'good-natured' locals. These sentiments are reflected in Korean soldiers' recurring observations of local poverty and underdevelopment. They are proud of Korea's advanced medical and engineering technology and organizational skills as well as material resources distributed among the local people. These soldiers experience national pride and a personal sense of purpose by helping local people improve their situations. The lens of benevolent paternalism interpreting transnational military labour is neither unique to Korean soldiers in Iraq nor merely individual perception. During the immediate post-Korean War decade, American soldiers interpreted their military labour, especially in connection to adoptions of war

orphans, through a similar lens (Kim 2009). Such interpretive lens sentimentalizes and obscures unequal power relations in the contexts of transnational military encounters. While the content of its surrogate military labour altered from that during the Vietnam War, South Korea remains a subempire working for its interests and those of the U.S.

While empathy with the local Iraqi Kurds is shared by both rank-and-file soldiers and officers, those with rural origins and indigent family backgrounds identify more so. Class background informs unequal encounters between Korean soldiers and the local people. Korean participation in the Iraq War relied on volunteers of all ranks (Special Planning Team 2007). Despite opposition to the war, recruitment was highly competitive across all ranks, particularly among non-commissioned officers (NCO) and, to a lesser degree, among commissioned officers (CO). Professional soldiers were motivated by economic benefits and opportunities for career advancement. Given the complexity of human motivations, their decisions could also be influenced by patriotism, heroism, and cosmopolitan adventure, especially for lower-class soldiers with fewer opportunities. Yet, in an era of global capitalism, the economic factor is salient and obvious from the compensation publicized in the recruitment announcement. During overseas deployment, a private could earn at least 1,600 USD per month and his or her family could receive a minimum compensation of 340,000 USD if he or she was killed in action (S. Yi 2004). This replicates class dynamics during the Vietnam War and reveals the surrogate nature of military labour performed by lower-class men and increasingly lower-class women in war zones. For officers, there is a two-tier system of COs graduated from four-year military academies and NCOs without such degree. Lower-class men who need to earn a living early on to support themselves and their families are more likely to pursue the NCO track. It is not surprising that NCO applicants showed the highest competition rate among all applicants.

A collection of 112 short essays and letters written by Zaytun soldiers of various ranks and gender (N. Kim 2005) reveals that one of the most common themes is of memories of their poor families in rural or urban areas. This collection is based on the monthly magazine, *Zaytun*, which published soldiers' writings during their deployment in Iraq.¹⁴ It has three thematic parts: focusing on loved ones, experiences of working in Iraq and Kuwait (before arriving in Iraq) among privates, and similar experiences among officers. A majority of letters and essays on the first theme convey familial narratives of sacrificing and hard-working parents, revealing the lower-class backgrounds of a majority of these soldiers. Honouring their parents, these soldiers express their gratitude and love for them. In particular, young soldiers describe their remorse for feeling embarrassed by their poor and unfashionable parents in front of their friends and other people or their regret for rebelling against their unsuccessful parents. One essay written by a captain narrates his profound sense of pride and joy as he helps his parents repurchase the family's farming land with his earnings from his Iraq deployment.

The Iraq War, South Korea's second major engagement in transnational militarism, highlights the complex roles militarism plays in shaping national identity. It triggered a generation of heated public debates domestically, which informed transnational encounters between Koreans and Iraqi Kurds in the ambiguous contact zones in Iraqi Kurdistan. The endurance of the opposition discourse sensitized political leadership in democratized Korea and thereby affected military policy towards the Kurds. Carrying out social services and reconstruction there, South Korean soldiers were actively instructed to practice friendship and respectful treatment of the local people. Under these conditions, these soldiers'

interactions with local people on the grounds mobilized collective memories of the Korean War and Japanese colonial rule and allowed them to develop empathy coupled with national pride. The cosmopolitan nationalism allowed the interactions between Korean soldiers and the Iraqi Kurds to be empathetic but it did not erase the unequal power relations between them and between them and the US.

Conclusion

In this article, we approach transnational militarism as a globalization force that produces transnational encounters and invites public debates over national identity. South Korean involvements in the two US-led wars illuminate complex ways in which transnational military engagements have contributed to the articulation of how to imagine the national 'we' and what it means to be a 'developed' nation. While the Vietnam War participation was instrumental to the construction of the anticommunist, capitalist, and militarized nation in the context of the Cold War, the Iraq War participation a generation later allowed for the emergence of a cosmopolitan nationalism that challenged the views from the previous era. Democratization of South Korea opened the discursive space for non-state actors to challenge the state-led version of national identity and facilitated the emergence of a cosmopolitan nationalism. Nonetheless, military and economic interests of the nation continue to set the terms of public debates and the final decisions to join the transnational wars. With the geopolitical repositioning of the military as forces for 'peacekeeping' and 'reconstruction', participation in the Iraq War was presented as an opportunity for South Korea to turn military operations into business opportunities. This resonates with the convergence of military and economic benefits during the Vietnam War despite the formal change in transnational militarism.

War-mediated transnational encounters, actual or imaged, contribute to the reproduction and modification of the social hierarchy based on race/ethnicity and class, and by doing so, these encounters play a crucial role in promoting, maintaining, and questioning the competing views of a national 'we'. In both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, encounters rarely challenge the US dominance. For both wars, the United States exerted paramount influence on South Korea's decisions to send troops. The debates surrounding the Iraq War illustrate that, although its hegemonic status is being challenged, the United States still maintains its position as the dominant 'other' vis-à-vis South Korea's national 'we'. Here we can recognize a limit of cosmopolitan nationalism: while it internally presents a compelling alternative to the Cold War era national identity, it reproduces global hierarchy of states as empire, subempire, and recipient of military aid in the context of transnational military encounters. Regardless of the nature of actual interactions, the depiction of encounters both with Vietnamese and Iraqi civilians portrays South Koreans as benevolent protectors and humanitarians, thus consolidating the status of Korea as a middle country or a subempire. Such recurring representation relies heavily on selective recollection and amnesia: the Iraqi Kurds are remembered as recipients of Korean benevolence by the Korean soldiers but both Kurdish and Vietnamese 'others' are mostly effaced from South Korea's public memory in the process.

Notes

1. See a special issue of *Critical Military Studies* 3(2) published in 2017 for a collection of innovative essays investigating masculinities at the margins.
2. A discussion of gender is beyond the scope of this article.
3. Park's speech at a rally in Daejeon, on 17 April 1967. All his speeches cited in this article were quoted from Presidential Archives of Korea (<http://pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp>) and translated by the authors.
4. Speech delivered at South Korean troop sendoff ceremony on 9 February 1965.
5. Speech delivered at the Tiger Unit send-off ceremony on 12 October 1965.
6. A special message sent to workers in Vietnam on 1 July 1966.
7. Speech delivered at the 17th anniversary of the founding of the South Korean military on 1 October 1965.
8. The National Assembly passed the dispatch bill with 155 yeas and 50 nays (Pak and Yi, 2004). According to a national survey conducted in March 2003, right before this passage, 54.9% supported it whereas 42.6% opposed it. Interestingly, 83.8% of the total respondents replied that they 'understand' the president who had to dispatch the Korean military (Special Planning Team 2007).
9. See (Ku 2012; Presidential Advisory Committee for Policy Planning 2008; Chŏn 2007, the National Assembly 2003; Paek 2003; Sim 2003).
10. See (Suh 2015; Kim 2007, Pak and Pak, 2007; E. Kim 2004a).
11. This analysis is based on various forms of memoirs. See (Yi 2017, 2007; Ch'oi 2006; Kim 2005; Yi 2005) and the blogs listed in the References.
12. Se-jin Mun, 9/12/2004 in *Scent of Zaytun*, edited by Kim (2005) N. Kim (2005).
13. An essay by Moon-hui Yi in *Scent of Zaytun*.
14. The magazine was published by a military chaplain to provide soldiers with space to deal with stress and hardship of transnational military labour. The collection was also published by the same military chaplain to honour his soldiers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Laboratory Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2018-LAB-225001).

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