Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree Progamme in
Comparative International Relations

Final Thesis

# The Unending War: Contested Memory, National Identity, and South Korea's Policy Towards North Korea

**Supervisor**
Ch. Prof. Francesca Frassineti

**Graduand**
Beatrice Germozzi
Matriculation Number 906767

**Academic Year**
2025 / 2026

*"Why would you sing the national anthem for people who'd been killed by soldiers?*

*Why cover the coffin with the Taegukgi?*

*As though it wasn't the nation itself that had murdered them."*

*-Han Kang, Human Acts*

# Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned Beatrice Germozzi, student ID number 906767, enrolled at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in the Master's Degree Programme in Comparative International Relations, author of the degree thesis: *"The Unending War: Contested Memory, National Identity, and South Korea's Policy Towards North Korea"*, thesis supervisor Professor Francesca Frassineti, aware of the penalties provided for in Article 76 of the Consolidated Act set out in Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000, and of the loss of benefits provided for in Article 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the event of false or misleading statements, under her own responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree no. 445 of 28 December 2000,

DECLARES

that she HAS used generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of her degree thesis, in particular:

- Google Gemini 3.6 Flash and Perplexity AI were used for language and style revision and optimization of texts to improve clarity and coherence. These tools were used in all chapters of the thesis.
- AI-based translator Naver Papago 1.11.18 was used to verify the automatic browser translations of the selected presidential speeches, and to translate materials collected from the museums for the analysis of Chapters 2 and 3.
- The accuracy, quality and reliability of any information generated were independently verified by double-checking with the primary and secondary sources. The translations were verified independently by consulting the original Korean-language materials.

DECLARES FURTHER

that all material generated or assisted by AI has been carefully checked, reviewed and reworked by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the quality, accuracy and scientific integrity of the work.

# Summary (ITA)

A seguito del cessate il fuoco del 27 luglio 1953, firmato dai rappresentanti degli Stati Uniti, della Corea del Nord e della Cina, un accordo di pace non è mai stato raggiunto. Per questo la letteratura si riferisce spesso alla guerra di Corea come a un conflitto infinito ("unending conflict") o incompiuto ("unfinished conflict"). A dispetto del nome, la zona demilitarizzata coreana (ZDC/DMZ) lungo il trentottesimo parallelo, stabilita dall'armistizio del 1953, è oggi tra le zone di confine più militarizzate al mondo, ricoperta da campi minati, e sorvegliata da soldati con artiglieria pesante e carri armati da entrambe le parti.

A causa della natura irrisolta del conflitto, i rapporti tra le due Coree sono caratterizzati da momenti di tensione e di distensione che si alternano in modo ciclico. I governi progressisti sono solitamente associati a una politica di distensione, incentrata sulla cooperazione e sulla coesistenza pacifica, mentre le amministrazioni conservatrici prediligono un approccio più securitario centrato sulla deterrenza. Tuttavia, questa distinzione non è netta, poiché elementi contrastanti sono presenti nelle politiche di entrambi i campi.

Teorie classiche come il neorealismo e il neoliberalismo tendono a spiegare le relazioni internazionali tramite variabili di natura strutturale o materiale, e concepiscono un sistema internazionale anarchico. Il neorealismo enfatizza elementi quali il mutevole equilibrio di potere internazionale, le alleanze, il dilemma della sicurezza e le capacità militari. Il neoliberalismo, d'altra parte, sostiene che la natura anarchica del sistema internazionale possa essere superata attraverso la cooperazione.

Tuttavia, il presente lavoro sostiene che questi due approcci non siano sufficienti a spiegare le apparenti contraddizioni e i frequenti cambiamenti nell'approccio della Corea del Sud nei confronti del nord. Al contrario, la tesi sostiene che le politiche di Seul siano influenzate da concezioni dell'identità nazionale contestate e da rappresentazioni della Corea del Nord contrastanti, in virtù di una politica della memoria altamente conflittuale.

Secondo autori costruttivisti come Nicholas Onuf e Alexander Wendt, la realtà è un costrutto sociale, costruito dagli esseri umani, in quanto esseri intrinsecamente sociali, attraverso le loro interazioni. D'altra parte, la realtà socialmente costruita contribuisce a costruire le persone così come sono. Questa dinamica riguarda anche gli stati, le cui identità e interessi sono in gran parte costruiti dalle strutture sociali, anziché essere determinati dalla natura umana o dalla politica interna. Inoltre, le identità e gli interessi degli Stati sono interdipendenti, nel senso che gli interessi dipendono dalle identità, poiché queste ultime generano motivazioni utili a spiegare i loro comportamenti, mentre le identità necessitano degli interessi per esercitare un'influenza

motivazionale sugli attori. Le varianti più critiche del costruttivismo si concentrano maggiormente sul ruolo del discorso e delle narrazioni nella produzione di significati, di soggetti e oggetti che contribuiscono a plasmare la politica estera.

Secondo il costruttivismo, la memoria collettiva e il trauma nazionale, l'identità collettiva, e gli interessi nazionali sono variabili interdipendenti e in costante evoluzione che insieme contribuiscono a plasmare la politica estera. Poiché l'identità collettiva si fonda sulla memoria collettiva, i cambiamenti nella memoria e nelle narrazioni del passato possono modificare la percezione degli interessi nazionali e, di conseguenza, orientare la politica estera.

Accanto all'approccio costruttivista, la presente tesi utilizza i criteri della English School per comprendere come la società internazionale, intesa come un insieme di stati che condividono delle norme, istituzioni, e una cultura comune, influisca sull'identità nazionale degli stati. Questo punto di vista è utile per analizzare l'impatto di pressioni normative internazionali, come discorsi sui diritti umani, sulla politica della memoria in Paesi, come la Corea del Sud, nei quali i meccanismi internazionali di giustizia di transizione, intesa come processo di confronto con il passato, hanno messo in discussione le narrazioni egemoniche del passato. Secondo il filo interpretativista della English School, la storia e la memoria collettiva sono centrali poiché possono spiegare come le concezioni condivise vengono formate e riprodotte, e come queste ultime influiscono sulle relazioni internazionali.

Pertanto, l'approccio costruttivista e il punto di vista della English School si prestano meglio ad affrontare la domanda di ricerca del presente lavoro, ovvero definire in quale modo e fino a che punto la memoria collettiva, l'identità nazionale e gli interessi nazionali influiscono sulla politica sudcoreana verso la Corea del Nord.

La fine degli anni Novanta vide una crescita nell'interesse accademico per il ruolo della memoria nelle relazioni internazionali. La rilevanza della memoria è infatti evidente nelle controversie internazionali riguardanti diverse interpretazioni del passato, diffuse in tutto il mondo e strettamente legate all'autopercezione e all'identità collettiva nel presente.

Sulla base del lavoro di Maurice Halbwachs e Aleida Assmann, la tesi intende la memoria collettiva come un costrutto sociale, ovvero una ricostruzione del passato in funzione delle esigenze politiche e sociali del presente. La selezione e l'omissione di specifici ricordi del passato ai fini della costruzione di un'identità nazionale rendono la memoria collettiva fortemente politica e, di conseguenza, oggetto di contesa. Lo Stato costruisce l'identità nazionale attraverso narrazioni del passato e processi di alterizzazione ("Othering"), differenziando il Sé (lo Stato) dall'Altro (ad esempio, il nemico percepito). Mentre nei regimi autoritari lo Stato esercita un controllo totale sulle narrazioni egemoniche, poiché i discorsi alternativi vengono spesso

silenziati con la forza, nelle società democratiche, diverse memorie collettive e identità competono tra loro. Le esperienze traumatiche, come le guerre civili, svolgono un duplice ruolo. Da un lato, possono essere mobilitate per rafforzare la coesione nazionale; dall'altro, emergendo in modo imprevedibile, possono destabilizzare il senso di continuità e coerenza dell'essere dello Stato, ovvero la sua sicurezza ontologica. Quest'ultima può anche essere messa in discussione dalla giustizia di transizione, la quale può minare le narrazioni statali consolidate.

Per ricostruire l'evoluzione delle narrazioni ufficiali e delle contronarrazioni della guerra di Corea e della divisione nazionale, la tesi individua tre fasi storiche che attraversano diversi governi, prima e dopo la transizione democratica. Queste sono: (i) il periodo bellico; (ii) i decenni autoritari all'indomani del conflitto; e (iii) il periodo successivo alla democratizzazione, con particolare enfasi sui governi di Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) e Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2025).

La ricostruzione delle narrazioni ufficiali si basa sull'analisi critica del discorso (ACD /CDA), accompagnata dall'analisi della storiografia, e applicata a documenti istituzionali e alle trascrizioni di discorsi presidenziali, nello specifico quelli di Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, Kim Dae-jung e Yoon Suk-yeol.

Durante la Guerra di Corea e i successivi regimi militari, i leader della Corea del Sud presentarono il Paese come vittima dell'«invasione illegale e pianificata» da parte del Nord del 25 giugno. Tale narrazione, nota come "*Yu-gi-oh"*, plasmò un'identità nazionale fondata sulla condizione di vittima, rispecchiando la retorica anticomunista della guerra fredda, che dipingeva la Corea del Nord come un "regime fantoccio" dell'Unione Sovietica. Nel corso della distensione internazionale degli anni Settanta, caratterizzata dall'allentamento delle tensioni tra Stati Uniti e Unione Sovietica, dalla normalizzazione dei rapporti diplomatici tra USA e Cina e da pressioni interne, il regime di Park Chung-hee fu indotto a sostituire l'atteggiamento conflittuale verso la Corea del Nord con una politica di riunificazione pacifica. L'analisi dei discorsi di Park ha rivelato che, per giustificare tale cambiamento di rotta, il presidente dovette riformulare la propria narrazione onde evitare di compromettere la sicurezza ontologica della Corea del Sud, basata su un'opposizione intrinseca al Nord. Il presidente ribadì la rappresentazione della Corea del Nord come nemico e presentò le nuove misure politiche come provvisorie.

L'anticomunismo non servì soltanto a costruire l'identità nazionale sudcoreana, ma anche a legittimare il regime di Park e a giustificare la repressione dell'opposizione politica.

L'analisi ha inoltre evidenziato come l'emergere di forze politiche e sociali contrapposte, in seguito alla transizione del Paese verso la democrazia, abbia aperto spazi per narrazioni alternative del passato e, di conseguenza, della sua identità nazionale in relazione alla Corea del Nord. La cosiddetta "rivolta storiografica" degli studiosi di sinistra, avvenuta alla fine degli anni

Ottanta, iniziò a contestare le narrazioni egemoniche, mettendo in discussione la legittimità dell'élite politica conservatrice. In particolare, tali studiosi denunciarono il passato collaborazionista dei conservatori, minandone le credenziali nazionaliste e contestando la legittimità dello Stato.

I regimi militari avevano coniugato il nazionalismo (di stampo antimperialista) con l'anticomunismo attraverso la narrazione della resistenza antisovietica, creando un discorso egemonico che dipingeva la Corea del Sud come l'unico Stato legittimo della nazione coreana. In contrapposizione, a causa del suo legame con l'Unione Sovietica e con il regime del Nord, il comunismo veniva presentato come un'ideologia antinazionale. Mettendo in luce la collaborazione delle élite conservatrici con potenze straniere, ovvero Giappone e Stati Uniti, il nazionalismo iniziò a essere associato alla sinistra.

Tali narrazioni contro-egemoniche non si limitarono all'ambito accademico, ma ebbero un impatto concreto sulla politica sudcoreana verso il Nord, traducendosi nella politica di apertura di Kim Dae-jung. La politica di riconciliazione e cooperazione, nota anche come "Sunshine Policy", si fondava sull'idea di un'identità coreana condivisa e di una fratellanza etnica con il Nord, radicate nella lotta della Corea contro l'imperialismo giapponese.

A tal proposito, l'analisi dei discorsi del Presidente Kim ha messo in luce anche la costruzione di un'identità nazionale basata sui principi di democrazia e libertà, nonché la definizione del suo "governo del popolo" e della Repubblica di Corea come eredi diretti del Governo Provvisorio della Corea del 1919. Per contro, l'analisi dei discorsi presidenziali di Yoon Suk-yeol ha mostrato come, nella Corea del Sud post-democratica, la securitizzazione delle relazioni con il Nord e la retorica anticomunista vengano ancora utilizzate per giustificare comportamenti repressivi all'interno del Paese.

L'impatto della giustizia di transizione sulla memoria collettiva è trattato nell'ultimo capitolo, il quale ne ricostruisce l'evoluzione storica a partire dalla liberazione dall'occupazione giapponese del 15 agosto 1945 a oggi. L'analisi ha messo in luce come il confronto con il passato non sia stato affatto un processo lineare, ma abbia invece subito diverse battute d'arresto. In particolare, subito dopo la liberazione, i tentativi di rivelare la verità circa il collaborazionismo dell'élite conservatrice con le autorità imperiali nipponiche si rivelarono inconcludenti a causa dell'ostruzionismo e dell'opposizione del regime di Rhee Syngman, costituito proprio da quelle élite coloniali che avevano mantenuto il proprio potere grazie alla protezione del governo militare statunitense.

Il Presidente Rhee, attraverso il pretesto del pericolo comunista, silenziò ogni tentativo di procedimento penale contro coloro che furono identificati come collaborazionisti dalla

commissione speciale d'inchiesta, istituita nel settembre 1948 con la legge speciale sulla punizione delle attività antinazionali.

Successivamente, anche i tentativi di riportare alla luce le violenze e i massacri contro la popolazione civile commessi dal regime di Rhee e dal governo militare statunitense durante la guerra furono repressi duramente dal nuovo regime militare di Park Chung-hee, salito al governo dopo una breve pausa di regime democratico con un colpo di stato nel 1961. Le famiglie delle vittime furono silenziate e stigmatizzate come elementi comunisti e pericoli per la sicurezza dello stato. Ciò avveniva in un contesto di diffusa repressione contro l'opposizione politica, che continuò anche sotto la guida del Generale Chun Doo-Hwan durante il suo regime militare dal 1979 al 1987. Fu solo a partire dal processo di transizione democratica alla fine degli anni Ottanta che i meccanismi di giustizia di transizione portarono finalmente a dei risultati concreti. In particolare, la commissione per l'incidente del 3 aprile a Jeju istituita nel 2000 (Jeju April 3 Commission) e la commissione per la verità e la riconciliazione della Repubblica di Corea del 2005 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea) hanno portato alla luce memorie rimosse relative alla guerra di Corea e alla divisione nazionale. Esse hanno rivelato i massacri di civili su vasta scala perpetrati durante il conflitto dalle autorità sudcoreane e statunitensi, oltre a quelli commessi dalle truppe nordcoreane. Le commissioni hanno inoltre rivelato massacri, violazioni dei diritti umani, sparizioni forzate e la coscrizione obbligatoria di studenti, atti compiuti dai regimi militari di Park Chung-hee e Chun Doo-hwan. Di conseguenza, la narrazione, che dipingeva la Corea del Sud come vittima dell'invasione provocata dal Nord, fu messa in discussione.

L'impatto della giustizia di transizione sulla memoria collettiva è illustrato attraverso l'analisi delle narrazioni della guerra e della divisione nazionale all'interno di due musei istituzionali, ovvero il museo nazionale di storia contemporanea coreana e il memoriale coreano della guerra. L'analisi del museo di storia contemporanea ha rivelato come le esibizioni abbiano in parte affrontato le uccisioni di massa perpetrate dalle truppe sudcoreane e statunitensi durante il conflitto. Ad esempio, prima dei lavori di ristrutturazione del 2022, le esposizioni trattavano più approfonditamente il massacro di Jeju e dedicavano ampio spazio alle violazioni dei diritti umani commesse dai regimi militari, valorizzando il processo di democratizzazione. Tuttavia, i recenti interventi di rinnovamento, attuati sotto l'amministrazione del Presidente Yoon, hanno modificato considerevolmente le mostre, riducendo lo spazio dedicato agli episodi di violenza di Stato. Gli allestimenti rinnovati sembrano riflettere le narrazioni revisioniste e statocentriche della "Nuova Destra" (New Right).

D’altro canto, il memoriale della guerra illustra la tesa convivenza tra un’identità fondata sulla condizione di vittima e sulla retorica anticomunista, da un lato, e un’identità nazionale basata su una comune identità coreana condivisa con il Nord, dall’altro. Ciononostante, tale nazionalismo serve a presentare la Corea del Sud come l’unico Stato legittimo della nazione coreana, sotto la cui guida dovrebbe avvenire un’eventuale riunificazione.

Sebbene entrambi i musei riflettano prevalentemente narrazioni conservatrici e promosse dallo Stato, la loro storia e i recenti sviluppi suggeriscono che la memoria collettiva sia ancora oggetto di forte contesa e strettamente dipendente dalla politica.

La presente tesi contribuisce alla letteratura sulla politica della memoria fornendo un quadro analitico applicabile a contesti post-coloniali analoghi e a situazioni di divisione nazionale, in cui la sicurezza ontologica e la giustizia di transizione si intrecciano nel plasmare la politica estera. Il lavoro contribuisce inoltre all’analisi della memoria nel contesto dell’Asia orientale, concentrandosi sulle relazioni tra le due Coree, un caso di studio spesso trascurato.

In conclusione, il lavoro dimostra come memorie e narrazioni contestate e contrapposte contribuiscono al perpetuarsi del “conflitto infinito”.

# Abstract

Through a constructivist and interpretivist approach, this thesis examines the extent to which the interplay between collective memory, national identity, and state interests impacts foreign policy. In particular, it examines the influence of South Korea's collective memory on its policies towards North Korea. The study argues that state narratives select, omit, and re-contextualize specific memories of the Korean War and of national division to construct a national identity that responds to the country's ontological security needs, and that serves as a tool of regime legitimization. The comparative analysis of two state-sponsored memory sites, namely the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History and the War Memorial of Korea, reflects the evolution of South Korea's memory politics, and suggests that even after the country's democratization and adoption of mechanisms of transitional justice, collective memory remains highly contested and tied to competition between opposite political factions.

# Index

**Introduction**.....1

**CHAPTER 1**: **Foreign Policy as a Social Construct: Collective Memory and National Identity**

1. Theoretical Framework.....6

1.1 Constructivism .....6

1.2 The English School.....10

1.3 Collective Memory.....13

1.4 The Dimension of Ontological Security .....17

1.5 Narratives of Trauma and Victimhood.....19

1.6 Memory Contestation and Transitional Justice.....22

1.7 Methodology.....24

**CHAPTER 2: State Narratives and National Identity From the Wartime to the Present Day**

2.1 The Korean War and National Division.....28

2.2 The Wartime Construction of the Self.....32

2.2.1 The Narrative of Victimhood.....34

2.2.2 The Theme of Unification.....35

2.2.3 The United States and the United Nations as the Protectors of the Free World.....36

2.3 The Post-War Military Regimes.....37

2.3.1 Ontological Security-Seeking Narratives: Framing Peaceful Unification.....41

2.3.2 Anti-Communism as a Tool of Regime Legitimization.....43

2.4 Democracy and Narrative Contestation.....45

2.4.1 The 386 Generation.....47

2.4.2 Kim Dae-jung's "Government of the People" and the Minjok.....51

2.4.3 Yoon Suk-yeol and the Persistence of Anti-Communism in Democratic South Korea.....57

**CHAPTER 3**: **The Impact of Transitional Justice and Reconciliation on South Korean State-Sponsored Museums**

3.1 Unearthing Silenced Memories amid State Violence, Political Contestation, and Social

Unrest....62
3.2 Truth Commissions and Collective Memory....69
3.3 Methodology....71
3.4 The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History....72
3.4.1 The NMKCH Narratives of the Korean War....75
3.5 The War Memorial of Korea: Tensions between Ethnic Nationalism and Anti-Communism……...81
3.5.1 The WMK Narratives of the Korean War....85
3.6 Final Thoughts....89
**Conclusion**....91
**Bibliography**....95
**Acknowledgments**....107

# List of Figures

**Figure 1.** Timeline of key events in 1949 78

**Figure 2.** Timeline of key events in 1950 78

**Figure 3.** Panel summarizing the main events from 1945 to 1950 using various hashtags 78

**Figure 4.** An illustration of the military capabilities of the North and South at the outbreak of the war 79

**Figure 5**. The Statue of Brothers 84

**Figure 6.** The Korean War Monument 84

**Figure 7.** Display of the Han River Defense Line 88

**Figure 8**. Display of the Han River Defense Line 88

# List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

**USAMGIK**- United States Military Government in Korea

**UNTCOK-** United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea

**UN**- United Nations

**ROK**- Republic of Korea

**DPRK**- Democratic People's Republic of Korea

**KCIA**- Korean Central Intelligence Agency

**CIC**- Counter Intelligence Corps

**SIC**- Special Investigation Committee

**TRCs**- Truth and Reconciliation Commissions

**TRCK-** Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea

**PPP**- People Power Party

**NMKCH-** National Museum of Korean Contemporary History

**WMK-** War Memorial of Korea

**CDA-** Critical Discourse Analysis

# Introduction

The Korean War is often described in the literature as "the unending war" or "the unfinished conflict". Although the armistice was signed by the representatives of the United States, the United Nations, North Korea and China on July 27, 1953, the Republic of Korea never formally signed the agreement, due to President Rhee Syngman's opposition. Moreover, although the agreement recommended that the signatories negotiate a peace agreement, the latter was never reached.

The ceasefire led to the establishment of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the 38th parallel, which despite its name, remains one of the most militarized areas in the world, with mines, patrols and heavy artillery and tanks on both sides.[1] Because of the unresolved nature of the conflict, inter-Korean relations have been characterized by cycles of escalation and de-escalation.

Since his election in June 2025, current President Lee Jae-myung has expressed his intention to improve relations with the North after years of tensions during the previous conservative administration of Yoon Suk-yeol. For instance, the current government has removed both fixed and mobile propaganda loudspeakers along the border in an effort to reduce psychological warfare, while claiming that this move would not undermine South Korea's military readiness.[2] The broadcasts transmitting world news and information about democratic and capitalist societies, as well as compilations of K-pop music, had been re-installed by President Yoon in response to the North's launching of trash-laden balloons to the South in 2024.[3]

Despite such initiatives of rapprochement, during his visit to the United States in August 2025, President Lee reiterated South Korea's firm stance on the denuclearization of the Peninsula, deemed crucial for the achievement of permanent peace, and to strengthen the alliance with the

---

[1] Christine Hong, "The Unending Korean War," *positions* 23 no.4 (2015): 597–617; Mark Peterson, *A brief history of Korea* (Infobase Publishing, 2009).

[2] "Removal of loudspeakers," *Korea Times*, August 5, 2025, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/editorial/20250805/ed-removal-of-loudspeakers

[3] "South Korea begins removing loudspeakers on border with North to reduce tensions", *The Guardian*, August 4, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/04/south-korea-removing-loudspeakers-north

United States.[4] After Lee's remarks, the North Korean state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) called the president a "confrontation maniac" and a "hypocrite".[5]

These recent developments illustrate the coexistence of different approaches to South Korea's policy towards the North within the government and across opposite political factions. The decision to suspend the propaganda broadcasts suggests efforts towards reconciliation, while the sustained emphasis on denuclearization and the U.S.-ROK alliance reflects the persistence of representations of the North as a security threat.

Traditional theories of international relations, such as structural realism, which views the international system as anarchic, tend to explain international relations through structural or material explanations, including the changing international balance of power, alliances, the security dilemma, and military capabilities. Neoliberalism on the other hand, argues that the anarchic nature of the international system can be overcome through cooperation.[6]

However, this thesis argues that material and external factors alone cannot explain the apparent contradictions and frequent shifts in South Korea's approach towards North Korea. Instead, it contends that Seoul's North Korea policies are influenced by contested constructions of national identity and different representations of North Korea, reflecting the South's contentious memory politics. During the Korean War and the periods of non-democratic rule, South Korean policies towards the North were shaped by anti-communism, national security and regime legitimization.

After the end of the Cold War, and with South Korea's transition to democracy, progressive forces have promoted alternative strategies focused on peaceful reunification and deeper inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation. Most notably, Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy was based on the idea of a shared ethnic community with the North, which however could not completely remove the anti-communist rhetoric found for instance in the narratives of former President Yoon Suk-yeol.

Accordingly, the thesis aims to answer the following question:

*How and to what extent have collective memory, national identity and state interests influenced South Korea's policies towards the North?*

To answer this question, the study adopts a theoretical framework combining constructivism and the English School. In particular, the study draws on the works of constructivist

---

[4]John Power, "North Korea blasts South Korea's Lee as 'confrontation maniac'", *AlJazeera*, August 27, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/27/north-korea-blasts-south-koreas-lee-as-confrontation-maniac

[5] Ibid.

[6] Michael Poulshock, "On the Unification of Neorealism and Neoliberalism," *SSRN*, 2024. 2, 2024.

authors like Alexander Wendt, Nicholas Onuf, and more recent critical perspectives. They understand collective memory and trauma, collective identity, and national interests as interdependent and constantly evolving variables that shape foreign policy.[7] Since collective identity is based on collective memory, changes in memory and narratives of the past can alter perceptions of national interests, and thus inform foreign policy accordingly.

Since the causes of foreign policy are deeply intertwined, the study does not disregard the impact of material and structural forces, but it aims to provide additional and complementary explanations, highlighting the role of meaning in individuals' and state actions and interactions.[8] Systemic constructivism, and particularly the one developed by Wendt, takes the state as the primary actor in the international system. On the other hand, the interpretivist strand of the English School can provide useful tools to explain how the international society, which functions as a system of international norms, can challenge narratives over national identity and pressure states into changing their representations of the past.[9]

Scholarly interest in the role of memory in international relations has grown since the late 1990s.[10] Building on the works of Maurice Halbwachs and Aleida Assmann, the thesis understands collective memory as a social construct, that is a reconstruction of the past that is functional to the present political and social needs.[11] The selection and omission of specific memories of the past for the construction of a national identity make collective memory highly political, and thus contested.

The state constructs national identity through narratives of the past and through processes of "Othering", differentiating the Self (the state) from the Other (e.g., the perceived enemy).[12]

---

[7] Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 384-396; Nicholas Onuf, "Constructivism: A user's manual." In *International Relations in a constructed world*, ed. Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 58-7.

[8] Maria Mälksoo, "The transitional justice and foreign policy nexus: the inefficient causation of state ontological security-seeking," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2019): 373-397.

[9] Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: a comparative historical analysis*. Routledge, 2002.

[10] Karl Gustafsson, "Memory politics and ontological security in Sino-Japanese relations," *Asian Studies Review* 38, no. 1 (2014): 71-86.

[11] Maurice Halbwachs, "Memoria collettiva e memoria storica", In *La memoria collettiva (1950)*, ed. Paolo Jedlowski and Teresa Grande (Edizioni Unicopli, 2001): 123-167; Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective". In *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford University Press, 2006), 210-227.

[12] Armen Hovhannisyan, "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy Making Process: A Social Constructivist Approach", *Monitor Strategic* 3-4 (2014): 36-46.; Matteo Dian, "Interpreting Japan's contested memory: Conservative and progressive traditions," *International Relations* 29, no. 3 (2015): 366-377; Faris Kocan,

While in authoritarian regimes, the state has full control over the hegemonic narratives, as alternative discourses are forcefully silenced, in democratic societies, different collective memories and identities are allowed to compete.[13]

Traumatic experiences, such as civil wars, can play a dual role. On the one hand, they can be mobilized to strengthen national cohesion, on the other hand, since they emerge unpredictably, they can disrupt the state's continuous and coherent sense of being, that is ontological security.[14] Transitional justice, as the process of coming to terms with the past, can also challenge the state's ontological security, as it undermines established state narratives.[15]

While the scholarship on memory politics in East Asia has focused mostly on the impact of Japanese colonial legacy on relations with China and South Korea, the thesis contributes to the field by focusing on the often-overlooked impact of memory on inter-Korean relations. In particular, the study contributes to the academic debate by combining the dimension of ontological security with transitional justice.

The impact of mechanisms of transitional justice and reconciliation, especially of the 2000 Jeju April 3 Commission, and the 2005 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea (TRCK) on South Korean collective memory through public education is assessed by analyzing the narratives of exhibitions in state-sponsored memory sites. These are the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History and the War Memorial of Korea, visited by the author between August and December 2025.

The analysis will investigate the extent to which the memories of the Korean War uncovered by the processes of transitional justice have been reflected in the exhibitions. The thesis argues that the redress movements challenged the narratives of the war, and by extension South Korea's national identity, pushing for a recalibration of interpretations of the past, reflected in the country's policy towards the North.

To reconstruct the official narratives of the Korean War and national division, the thesis relies on the analysis of historiography, as well as on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) applied

---

"Collective memory and an interpretative approach: The struggle over Kosovo's independence as an ideational background for contemporary Serbia's foreign policy choices", *Croatian Political Science Review* 56, no. 3-4 (2019): 200-217

[13] Aline Sierp, "The politics of memory: Between history, identity and conflict," *Government and Opposition* 60, (2025): 1464–1483.

[14] Adam B. Lerner, "The politics of trauma and victimhood," In *Handbook on the Politics of Memory*, ed. Maria Mälksoo (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 147-162; Phuong A. Nguyen, "Engaging With Temporal Others: Memory, Trauma and (In) security Across Time," *Millennium* 53, no.3 (2025): 631–657.

[15] Maria Mälksoo, "The transitional justice and foreign policy nexus", 373-397.

to institutional documents and transcriptions of presidential speeches, namely those of Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, Kim Dae-jung, and Yoon Suk-yeol. CDA is also applied to the materials collected from the museum exhibitions, namely transcriptions and translations of panels' descriptions. The thesis is divided into three chapters:

Chapter 1 outlines the main theoretical framework and provides an overview of the academic debate on the politics of memory at the domestic and international level. It presents the concepts of ontological security, trauma and victimhood, and delineates five narratives that states can use in memory diplomacy, namely glorification, self-victimhood/self-victimization, amnesia, acknowledgement, and contrition.[16] The first chapter also addresses the multitude of actors involved in shaping collective memory and national trauma in countries of recent democratic transition, as well as in post-colonial and post-conflict societies.

Chapter 2 investigates the evolution of different state- and non-state narratives related to national division and to the 1950-1953 conflict throughout successive administrations before and after the transition to democracy. In particular, the study identifies the following phases: (i) the wartime period; (ii) the authoritarian decades in the aftermath of the conflict; and (iii) the period following democratization, with particular emphasis on the governments of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003), and Yoon Suk-yeol (2022-2025).

Chapter 3 outlines the evolution of transitional justice and reconciliation in South Korea and investigates the extent to which these efforts are represented in museum narratives.

In the conclusion, the author will reflect on how this study can provide a framework for understanding the relations between collective memory, national identity, national interests and foreign policy that might be applied to similar post-colonial contexts, and countries which experienced division and civil war. The conclusion will also address potential avenues for future research.

[16] Matteo Dian, "Interpreting Japan's contested memory", pp. 363–377; Faris Kocan, "Collective memory and an interpretative approach", pp. 200-217.

# CHAPTER 1

## Foreign Policy as a Social Construct: Collective Memory and National Identity

### 1. Theoretical Framework

### 1.1 Constructivism

One of the central debates within the field of international relations revolves around its two mainstream theories, realism and liberalism that then gave rise to the following modern variants: neorealism, or structural realism, and neoliberalism, or (neo)liberal institutionalism.[17] Neorealism views international relations primarily as a struggle for power, and emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system because it lacks a higher authority capable of enforcing international norms. This creates an environment of insecurity and uncertainty about each actor's intentions and thus the main goal becomes survival and enhancing relative gains.[18]

On the other hand, neoliberalism argues that cooperation between states, which can lead to the creation of international institutions, can minimize the impact of anarchy. This cooperation is possible because states prioritize absolute gains and "mutually beneficial exchanges".[19] Despite these differences, both approaches share an understanding of states as rational actors operating in a self-help environment. For this reason, they have been classified as rationalist theoretical approaches.[20]

The peaceful demise of the bipolar confrontation in the late 1980s had a profound impact on the theory of international relations. As neorealism and neoliberalism struggled to anticipate or explain this change, in the early 1990s, constructivism received renewed attention because mainstream theories had given less importance to the social element of international relations, focusing mostly on the material interests of states.[21]

---

[17] Michael Poulshock, "On the Unification of Neorealism and Neoliberalism," *SSRN*, 2024. 2, 2024.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Christian Reus-Smit, "The Constructivist Turn: Critical Theory After the Cold War," Working Paper No. 1996/4: 1-16. Series: Australian National University, Dept. of International Relations.
[21] Christian Reus-Smit, 1996, p. 6; Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," 384-396; Runa Das, "Critical social constructivism: 'culturing' identity, (in) security, and the state in international relations theory," *Indian Journal of Political Science* 70, no. 4 (2009): 961–982.

Neorealism does not account for the role of rules, norms and institutions in shaping the identities and interests of states. While recognizing the existence of an international society, neoliberalism understands the social interactions between states as motivated mostly by calculations of absolute gains.[22] By contrast, constructivism could explain the social changes within the Soviet Union by focusing on ideational factors such as norms, identity, culture, and legitimacy.[23]

The term 'constructivism' was first coined by Nicholas Onuf in 1989 and rather than a proper theory, it was understood as an alternative "systematic way of thinking about social relations in general and international relations in particular".[24] Accordingly, humans are inherently social beings, constructing reality through their interactions. This means that reality is socially constructed, and that social relations "construct people-ourselves-into the kind of beings that we are".[25]

This view is shared by Alexander Wendt, who addresses the interaction between human agency and social structures, and between ideas and material life, arguing that constructivism is embedded in social theory.[26] Wendt's take on constructivism shares some similarities with the rationalist thinking, as he adopts both a state-centered- and a systemic approach, and agrees with Onuf in identifying states as the primary agents of the international system that make rational choices based on their interests.[27] However, unlike neorealism and neoliberalism, Wendt argues that state identities and interests are for the most part constructed by social structures, rather than determined by human nature or domestic politics. Moreover, state identities and interests depend on each other in the sense that interests depend on identities, as the latter create motivations that can help explain behaviors, while identities need interests to have a motivational influence on actors.[28]

Wendt identifies four types of identity applicable to state actors: personal or corporate, type, role, and collective. Corporate identity refers to actors' "intrinsic and self-organizing structures".[29] For states, there are various constituting elements including a territory and a

[22] Christian Reus-Smit, 1996, p. 7
[23] Martha Finnemore, and Alexander Wendt, "When 'old' constructivism was new: reflections on classical constructivism," *Perspectives on Politics* 22, no.4 (2024): 1248-1268.
[24] Nicholas Onuf, "Constructivism: A user's manual." In Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, Paul Kowert, ed., *International Relations in a Constructed World* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 58-78.
[25] Ibid., p. 59.
[26] Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation", pp. 384-396.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

population, but most importantly the collective consciousness and memory that distinguish between the "Self" and the "Other".[30]

Corporate identity creates four basic interests: physical security, ontological security, recognition as an actor by others, and development, as in the maintenance of a collective economic well-being. Ontological security refers to a state or society's perception and feeling of being a continuous and stable Self.[31] These four basic interests do not depend on interactions; however, their attainment depends on how the corporate identity is defined in relation to the Other, thus assuming some sorts of socialization.[32]

Wendt's second type of identity, namely type identity, refers to the characteristics that tie together different actors. When these intrinsic traits are labeled by others as being part of a specific group, they assume a social meaning, becoming social type identities. Therefore, type identity is constructed in relation to the Other, and varies across cultures.[33] For states, these types correspond to types of regimes or forms of states like capitalist, communist or fascist, and are defined by internal principles of state and society organization. However, not all shared characteristics become type identities. Also, two states can share the same type identity (e.g. democratic state) while having different systems of governance (e.g. presidential or parliamentary).[34]

Unlike type identities, role identities do not depend on intrinsic traits but only exist in relation to others, and in particular to the expectations and behavioural norms that are attached to such social roles based on a shared understanding.[35] While foreign policy identifies the sources of these role identities in domestic politics and leaders' beliefs, Wendt argues that roles highly depend on the Other's recognition and expectation.[36]

Like type and role identity, collective identity incorporates the Other into the Self, but unlike the previous two, collective identity takes a step further by blurring the distinction between the Self and the Other and merging them into a single identity. In this way, Wendt challenges the realists' argument that states only act in their self-interests.

Onuf shares the constructivist assumption that agents and structures simultaneously constitute, enable and restrain themselves, or in his own words that "people make society and

---

[30] Alexander Wendt, "The state and the problem of corporate agency," In *Social theory of international politics*, ed. Steve Smith, Thomas Biersteker, Chris Brown, et al (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 202
[31] Maria Mälksoo, "The transitional justice", p. 374
[32] Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation", p. 385
[33] Alexander Wendt, "The state and the problem", p. 226
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p. 227
[36] Ibid.

society makes people" in a constant two-way process.[37] However, unlike Wendt who gives a greater emphasis on the role of the processes of interactions in creating agents and forming their identities, Onuf believes that rules are the central link between people and society, and states and the international system in general. This is based on the assumption that "saying is doing".[38]

Indeed, rules are formed from "speech acts", which are statements suggesting people what they should do.[39] Rules construct agents because they give them choices to act in a certain way on behalf of certain social constructions, which could be the individuals themselves or groups of individuals, like states (e.g. either observing or ignoring the rule in the simplest case), thus making individuals actively participate in the society.[40] At the same time, agents construct rules through speech acts, creating patterns and practices, and thus making the world as it is. These patterns are called institutions, which at the international level include for instance balance of power, spheres of influence and the principle of sovereignty, and constitute international regimes.[41]

With regards to the structure, Onuf argues that anarchy is not a condition of absence of rules, because there are rules even if these are asymmetrical, since there are rulers and followers, and agents that do not follow the rules. International society, and thus anarchy according to Onuf, is a social arrangement.[42] Wendt generally agrees with this view but emphasizes the fact that anarchy is socially constructed through interactions, or in his often-cited words "[A]narchy is what states make of it".

Overall, Wendt and Onuf share some core assumptions (e.g. states as the main actors of the international system, and the social construction of reality), but they diverge on the instruments of social construction because Wendt's symbolic interactionism stands in opposition to Onuf's discursive approach.

Runa Das characterizes the approaches of Wendt and Onuf as "structural constructivism", and introduces other two variants, namely the "modernist/post-modernist constructivism", and "critical constructivism".[43] According to Das, the modernist/post-modernist constructivist approach is more concerned with the role of "intertextuality" and discourse in producing specific understandings and meanings of reality.[44]

---

[37] Nicholas Onuf, "Constructivism", p. 59; Harry D. Gould, "What is at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?" In *International Relations in a constructed world*, ed. Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (Routledge, 2015), p. 80
[38] Nicholas Onuf, "Constructivism", p. 59
[39] Ibid.
[40] Harry D. Gould, "What is at Stake", p. 80
[41] Ibid., 82
[42] Nicholas Onuf, "Constructivism", p. 74
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., p. 966

For example, in her analysis of the U.S. Counterinsurgency policy in the Philippines during the early 1950s, Roxanne Doty focuses on how meanings are produced and associated with various subjects/objects and how these enable specific interpretations, informing foreign policy accordingly.[45] By adopting a discursive practices approach, Doty argues that behind specific foreign policy actions there must already be certain constructed meanings and types of social actors and relationships.[46] In her work, the question of power as production of meaning is central, and it proves particularly valuable for the investigation of how narratives can shape collective memory.

The other variant of constructivism preferred by Das is critical social constructivism, which like the modernist/post-modernist approach focuses on the role of meanings and narratives, and how these shape people's actions, although it argues that these are culturally constructed.[47] According to Weldes *et al*., crises and insecurities are produced by narratives that shape perceptions of danger and that are rooted in cultural and social practices.[48]

The cultural construction of insecurity is related to the construction of identity, as this is produced through social interactions wherein the meaning of the Self is perceived as different from the Other.[49] These differences are essential to the Self, as they constitute the Self. Therefore, when these differences are transformed into the Other, they can become a source of insecurity undermining the meaning associated with the Self, and the reasons that justify the existence of the Self.[50] As a consequence, the authors argue that state identity and crises enable each other.

---

[45] Roxanne L. Doty, "Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines," *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1993): 297-320.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Runa Das, "Critical social constructivism", p. 974.
[48] Jutta Weldes *et al*.,"Constructing Insecurity," In *Cultures of insecurity: states, communities, and the production of danger*, ed. Jutta Weldes et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 10-11.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

## 1.2 The English School

Parallel to the emergence of constructivism, in the United Kingdom and Europe, the English School, which also acknowledges and emphasizes the social element of international relations, started to gain more influence.[51] It developed from the British Committee for the Theory of International Politics, which distinguished itself from the American counterpart, and was led first by Herbert Butterfield, then by Martin Wight, later by Adam Watson and lastly by Hedley Bull.[52] This group of scholars, historians and former diplomats first met in January 1959 to discuss the main questions of the theory of international relations, mostly focusing on the nature and evolution of state systems.[53]

Barry Buzan describes the English School as a valuable, underexploited resource within the study of international relations that can transcend the traditional debates about theory discussed previously. According to Buzan, its innovative approach stems from the combination of the Hobbesian understanding of international anarchy with the Grotian idea of a socially constructed international order.[54] Machiavellian/Hobbesian realism, Grotian rationalism, and Kantian revolutionism are the three main traditions of thought identified by Martin Wight, corresponding to the three main dimensions of international relations that is the states-system/international system, the international society and the world society.[55]

In the Machiavellian or Hobbesian tradition, the international system is equated to the state of nature, characterized by interstate conflict, and thus understood through a realist lens, through the concepts of power politics and anarchy.[56]

The Grotian tradition argues for the existence of an international society. This is defined as more than a mere system of independent states that interact with each other based on calculations on the others' behaviors (international system), but it is a group of states united by shared rules and institutions that they have created to manage their relations.[57] This vision highlights the fact that international relations are not characterized only by conflict, but also by

---

[51] Christian Reus-Smit,"Imagining society: constructivism and the English School." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4, no. 3 (2002): 487–509.

[52] Adam Watson, "Introduction," In *The Evolution of International Society: a comparative historical analysis* (Routledge, 2002), 2; Timothy Dunne, "Introduction," In *Inventing international society: a history of the English School* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), xi.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Barry Buzan, "The English School: an underexploited resource in IR," *Review of international studies* 27, no.3 (2001): 471-488.

[55] Balkan Devlen, Patrick James, and Özgür Özdamar, "The English School, international relations, and progress," *International Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2005): 171-197.

[56] Ibid., p. 175; Martin Wight, "An anatomy of international thought," *Review of international studies* 13, no. 3 (1987): 221-227.

[57] Barry Buzan, "The English School", p. 476.

common interests.[58] Accordingly, the international system becomes an international society when its members also share a common culture, which is an element that distinguishes the English School from neoliberalism. An international society needs an international system to exist, but an international system can exist without an international society.[59]

Lastly, for the Kantian tradition, ideas, ideologies and similar interests bound different groups of people together, contributing to form the world society.[60] This tradition looks at individuals, non-state organizations and the global population; actors that can transcend the state system. Accordingly, Revolutionism understands the transcendence of the state system at the core of IR theory.[61] This pattern of international relations is described by Wight as the "moral solidarity: the communion deeper than politics and economics", that is "psychological and cultural".[62]

Buzan argues that the link between world society and international society is not yet well developed. For instance, it is unclear how transnational firms relate to world society, understood as a shared identity among individuals.[63] Moreover, Buzan notes that according to Butterfield, Wight and Watson, world society is a prerequisite for international society because the state system cannot exist without some kind of cultural unity. Ancient Greece is an illustration of this point. However, by looking at the expansion of the European international society, encompassing different civilizations, one could also argue that a pre-existing world society is not necessary to form an international society.[64]

Bevir and Hall agree with Buzan on the lack of precision in the concepts and methods of the English School and, in particular, highlight the lack of a clear outline of its philosophical approach.[65] They argue that it is important to define whether states are natural entities or social constructs in order to explain their behaviors. They put forth a distinction within the English School between two different philosophical strands: a structuralist one, grounded in positivism, and an interpretivist one.[66]

This thesis draws particularly on the interpretivist approach of the English School because it focuses on the meanings of actions for the individual, understanding human actions as guided

[58] Balkan Devlen et al., "The English School, international relations", p. 178.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Barry Buzan, "The English School", p. 475.
[62] Martin Wight, "An anatomy", p. 221
[63] Barry Buzan, "The English School", p. 475.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Mark Bevir and Ian Hall, "Interpreting the English school: History, science and philosophy," *Journal of International Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (2020): 120-132.
[66] Ibid.

by traditions that are a set of beliefs, concepts, and theories about the world.[67] According to interpretivism, society is a sort of tradition, not a structure, and it influences beliefs and actions. On the other hand, structuralists distinguish between the ideational and material aspects of international relations and highlight the inevitability of the structures and their influence on states and individuals.[68]

History and collective memory are central elements of the interpretivist variant of the English School because they help explain how shared understandings are formed and reproduced, and how these shape international relations. Wight, Bull and Watson systematically studied the evolution of states systems across the world throughout different periods, particularly during the ancient world, the European international society, and the contemporary world society.[69] By analyzing their commonalities and differences, these scholars tried to understand how shared norms, institutions, and identities enable social order, and how these systems can change.[70]

## 1.3 Collective Memory

International disputes over different interpretations of the past are common worldwide and are strictly tied to self-perception and collective identity in the present, which underscores the relevance of memory in international relations.[71] According to Aline Sierp, memory politics as a subfield of Memory Studies has been growing considerably in the past twenty years.[72] Since the 1980s, the study of memory politics has become an interdisciplinary field that includes scholarship on transnational and transitional justice, security, democratization, and trauma.[73] Aleida Assman argues that the rise of new memories, testimonies, movies and museums, which she calls “memory boom”, has been propelled by various historical events. The end of the Cold War allowed for “frozen memories” that had been buried by ideology-based narratives to emerge especially in the former communist countries.[74] The process of de-colonization also contributed to the recovering of indigenous history, culture, memories and own narratives.[75]

---

[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Adam Watson, "Introduction”, p. 3
[70] Ibid.
[71] Peter J. Verovšek, “Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: the politics of memory as a research paradigm,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no.3 (2016): 529-543.
[72] Aline Sierp, “The politics of memory: Between history, identity and conflict,” *Government and Opposition* 60, (2025): 1464–1483.
[73] Ibid., p. 1465.
[74] Aleida Assmann, “Memory, Individual and Collective”, pp. 210-227.
[75] Ibid.

Sierp divides the literature on memory politics into two main groups namely empirical case studies, and theoretical frameworks. When it comes to case studies, scholars have often focused on Europe, specifically the post-Soviet Eastern region, European colonial legacy in Africa, and East Asia. In the latter, the focus has been on the legacy of the military expansion of the Japanese Empire on Japan's relations with Korea and China, while the role of memory in inter-Korean relations has received relatively less attention. In the context of Western Europe, most discussions have revolved around the impact of World War II and the Holocaust.[76]

From the theoretical perspective, Faris Kočan further categorizes the methodology employed in the study of collective memory into a normative approach that focuses on questions of reconciliation, justice and responsibility at both domestic and international levels, and a positivist approach, which tries to explain state behavior with collective memory.[77]

The first to systematically study the concept of 'collective memory' was French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs. Among his work on the topic are: "Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire" (The social frameworks of memory), published in 1925, and "La mémoire collective" (The collective memory), published posthumously in 1950, in which for the first time he tried to distinguish between autobiographical memory, historical memory, history and collective memory.[78] Although Halbwachs treated these as separate concepts, he recognized their deep interdependence. According to the sociologist, individual memories do not exist in isolation, instead, an individual requires the shared memories of others within a social group to which they belonged in the past or of which they are part, to recall their personal experiences.[79] Halbwachs argued that even when others were not physically present at a specific moment, each person internalizes the point of views, knowledge and memories of other people and of society more in general.[80] Therefore, individual memories live within social frameworks (cadres sociaux) connected to different social groups. These include families, religious groups or political organizations. Because individuals are simultaneously part of different collectives, their memories are complex and are influenced by those different groups. Accordingly, there are as many collective memories as there are social groups.[81] Since individuals' relations with different groups are constantly broken and re-formed,

[76] Aline Sierp, "The politics of memory", pp. 1466.
[77] Faris Kocan, "Collective memory and an interpretative approach", pp. 200–217.
[78] Maurice Halbwachs, "Memoria individuale e memoria collettiva", pp. 79-123; Halbwachs, Maurice. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), ed. Jean-Marie Tremblay (Digital edition, Les Classiques des sciences sociales, 2002).
[79] Maurice Halbwachs, "Memoria individuale e memoria collettiva", p. 80
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid., pp. 79-123

individual memory tends to fade unless it is remembered by people connected to that event.[82] Some episodic memories can surpass a person's lifetime if transmitted orally within 80 to 100 years as stories and anecdotes.[83] Therefore they are limited in time.

Aleida Assman built on the work of Halbwachs arguing that the distinction between individual (autobiographical) and collective memory is not exhaustive enough. While she shares Halbwach's view that individual memories are influenced by social interactions and shared experiences, being continuously shaped and readapted, she suggests differentiating between individual, social, political and cultural memory.[84]Accordingly, this distinction can better illustrate how memories are constructed at the individual and group level.

As a matter of fact, individual memories are not shared only within the family, but also with other people of a community with whom individuals have no direct relation. This is the case of generational memory that emerges among individuals with similar age that share common experiences of historical events, common beliefs, values and attitudes, and that tend to perceive themselves as distinct from the previous and next generations.[85] The change of generations is crucial to reconstruct social memory and shape its norms and values.[86]

Halbwachs distinguishes between memory and history. Given that individual memories depend on lived experiences, history takes over in the form of a museum or a monument when living memory ends.[87] While Assman agrees with Halbwachs' argument that individual and social memories are embedded in lived experiences, she argues that political and cultural memory are mediated.[88] They are transmitted by historical records and kept alive through celebrations, monuments and other mnemonic practices as well as education and recurring occasions for collective participation.[89] Institutions like museums and monuments, schools and the media act as mediators and narrative instruments.[90] This makes social memory intergenerational while political and cultural memories are transgenerational.

---

[82] Ibid.

[83] Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective", pp. 210-227.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Maurice Halbwachs, "Memoria individuale e memoria collettiva", pp. 79-123; Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective", pp. 210-227.
[86] Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective", pp. 210-227
[87] Maurice Halbwachs, "Memoria collettiva e memoria storica". In *La memoria collettiva (1950)*, ed. Paolo Jedlowski and Teresa Grande (Edizioni Unicopli, 2001), pp. 123-167.

[88] Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective", pp. 210-227.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Armen Hovhannisyan, "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy Making Process", 36-46; Lewis A. Coser, " Introduction: Maurice Halbwachs 1877-1945," In *The Heritage of Sociology*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1-34; Uwase N. Mutoni, "The Role of Memory in Shaping National Identity," *Eurasian Experiment Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2025): 169-176.

Building on this, Pierre Nora, who is another prominent scholar in the literature of collective memory, brings to the discussion the *lieux de mémoire* ('sites of memory'), which he argues originate from the need to "create archives, maintain anniversaries and organize celebrations" because memory is not spontaneous but an active effort to register history in order to preserve and reproduce national identity.[91] To be transformed into long-term collective memory, social memory has to be organized and elaborated.[92] History then becomes memory as shared knowledge and collective identification.[93]

National memory, as a form of political memory, is constructed through processes of selection and exclusion of memories considered "useful" from those perceived as irrelevant.[94] Jeffrey K. Olick describes memory as a constant negotiation between the past and the present through which collective identity is formed, and "which is used to make sense of a country's identity and role in the world, as well as its interests and duties these give rise to."[95] In this process of memory selection, memories that align with current identity needs are prioritized while others are disregarded. Thus, remembering and forgetting are equally important for identity construction.[96]

Lastly, cultural memory is situated between the remembered and the forgotten memories and refers to all those practices of storing information in institutions like libraries, museums, and archives. Cultural memory is neither actively remembered nor totally forgotten, but it remains physically accessible for an eventual use in the form of stored information.[97] Cultural memories like works of art are intricate because they are more ambivalent and thus can be interpreted more freely.[98]

Matteo Dian identifies two main ways in which the literature has studied the effects of collective memory on foreign policy and international relations: collective memory as part of the national identity, or collective memory as a justification and legitimization of foreign policy.[99] The former employs an interpretative approach, while the latter takes an instrumentalist posture. Traditional theories of international relations like neorealism and neoliberalism do not consider collective memory to be a determining factor of foreign policy, but rather an enabling variable, or

[91] Pierre Nora, "Between memory and history: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 11.
[92] Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective",pp. 210-227.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.; Uwase N. Mutoni, "The Role of Memory", pp. 169-176.
[95] Jeffrey K. Olick, "Introduction: Memory and the Nation: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations," *Social Science History* 22, no.4 (1998): 377–387.
[96] Uwase N. Mutoni, "The Role of Memory", pp. 169-176.
[97] Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective", pp. 210-227.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Matteo Dian, "Interpreting Japan's contested memory", pp. 363–377.

as an instrument that is used to justify a certain policy choice.[100] For instance, Joseph Nye categorized collective memory as a form of soft power tool to legitimize and strengthen the credibility of the state and downgrade that of the rival.[101] By contrast, under a constructivist framework, memory is treated as a constitutive variable.[102]

This thesis builds mostly on the stream that treats collective memory as part of national identity, including the work of Dian (2015), Faris Kocan (2019), Jennifer Lind (2008), and Kathrin Bachleitner (2019), while also considering the role of transitional justice, democratization and the role of international norms. In particular, the thesis investigates how the trauma and memory of the Korean War is built into South Korea's national identity, and how the transition to democracy that took place in the late 1980s and subsequent processes of transitional justice have impacted the formulation of policies towards North Korea, by contributing to the transformation of the country's national identity.

## 1.4 The Dimension of Ontological Security

This thesis understands national identity as a common representation and perception of a collective that shares a history, culture, economy, institutions and involves an emotional, cognitive and value-based attachment.[103] The ideas, practices and values that form national identity are based on shared memories, which are constructed narratives of the "country's past, its role in the world, its heroes, its 'enemies'" (past and present), and its "chosen trauma, glory or myth.[104]

These memories and narratives contribute to differentiating the Self from the Other and to bringing together people who share a similar value system. Similarly to memory, identity is a social phenomenon, formed through processes of self-categorization and identification wherein the community creates its own shared characteristics in opposition to the Other.[105]

This thesis argues that ontological security is the connecting element between national identity, collective memory, and narratives. Ontological security represents the need to maintain

[100] Armen Hovhannisyan, "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy", pp. 36-46
[101] Ibid.
[102] Aline Sierp, "The politics of memory", pp. 1464-1483.
[103] Uwase N. Mutoni, "The Role of Memory", pp. 169-176.
[104] Armen Hovhannisyan, "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy", pp. 36-46; Matteo Dian, "Interpreting Japan's contested memory", p. 366; Faris Kocan, "Collective memory and an interpretative approach", 206.
[105] Armen Hovhannisyan, "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy", p. 36.

a "sense of a continuous and stable Self", which at the group level is observable when actors keep choosing actions believed to be consistent with their identity.[106]

Since collective identity is often constructed by differentiation, ontological security also presumes continued processes of "Othering" that are observable for instance in public discourse as narratives, and policies.[107] Therefore, preserving national identity and ontological security, and by extension collective memories that sustain them, becomes a key priority and interest of the state that guides its foreign policy.[108]

There are various instances where, besides its physical security, the state's ontological security is being challenged. These include conflicts, civil wars, and traumatic events.[109] As it will be discussed later on, transitional justice also represents a challenge to ontological security pressuring states to come to terms with past human right abuses, for example during the transition to democracy or following a conflict.[110] In these cases, identity narratives are disrupted revealing internal inconsistencies and unresolved grievances.[111]

To understand how conflicts, civil wars, traumatic events and transitional justice impact ontological security and thus national identity, it is necessary to outline which types of narratives and mechanisms are used to maintain a continuous sense of self when facing internal and external challenges. According to Dian and Kocan, states can use five narratives in memory diplomacy: glorification, self-victimhood/self-victimization, amnesia, acknowledgement, and contrition.[112]

Glorification takes place when the state acknowledges its past actions, framing them as heroic acts and thus legitimizes or justifies conflicts or actions that have harmed others. On the other hand, through self-victimhood, the state portrays itself as the victim and claims that it was forced into the conflict by the Other.[113] Amnesia occurs when the state removes a particularly traumatic instance from the national narrative. With a narrative of acknowledgment, the state recognizes its wrongdoings without expressing formal apologies and remorse to the victims, leaving space for different interpretations and memories. Conversely, contrition happens when the state promotes practices such as ceremonies and instruments like museums.[114]

---

[106] Maria Mälksoo, "The transitional justice and foreign policy nexus", p. 374.
[107] Noga Glucksam, "I fear, Therefore I am: Victimhood and the struggle for ontological security in the Liberia truth commission," *Civil Wars* 20, no. 1 (2018): 89-108.
[108] Armen Hovhannisyan, "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy", pp. 36-46.
[109] Dan Gudgeon, "Fateful moments and narrative change during conflict: navigating ontological security for the Korean peace process," *Security Dialogue* 00, no. 0 (2026): 1-12.
[110] Maria Mälksoo, "The transitional justice and foreign policy nexus", pp. 373-397.
[111] Dan Gudgeon, "Fateful moments", pp. 1-12.
[112] Matteo Dian, "Interpreting Japan's contested memory", pp. 363–377; Faris Kocan, "Collective memory", pp. 200-217.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.

While Dian and Kocan outline various types of state's constructed narratives, Dan Gudgeon's approach is valuable to understand how transitioning from one narrative to the other is justified and made possible. Gudgeon points out that narratives are not fixed but can be redesigned over time in response to internal and external challenges to ontological security.[115] Rather than viewing narrative change as a cause of ontological insecurity and thus as inherently destabilizing, the author argues that states can secure ontological stability through narrative change.[116]

They can do so by establishing events that are framed as "fateful" by the state. Through fateful moments, political actors can change identity narratives in a way that is perceived as natural and thus acceptable by the population.[117] Unlike the "critical situations", fateful moments do not necessarily threaten the state's fundamental identity.[118] The Self-Other relations and identity narratives can be adjusted and reinterpreted while claiming that the core Self remains unaltered.

## 1.5 Narratives of Trauma and Victimhood

After having examined how narratives are constructed and shaped by political actors, this section analyses how unresolved trauma challenges the state's ontological identity, and what narratives are employed to address these unresolved grievances that are particularly relevant to post-conflict, post-colonial and post-authoritarian contexts such as South Korea.

Scholarly interest in trauma emerged across different disciplines in 1980 following the official diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of veterans who had fought in the Vietnam War.[119] Adam B. Lerner argues that the social and political science scholarship that has tried to analyze the collective dimension of trauma can be divided into "two-and-a-half" traditions.[120] Drawing on psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis, individual-oriented disciplines tend to cumulate individual traumas or equate individual and collective experiences. This approach is not easily applicable to the study of international relations because it does not properly explain the role of intervening factors such as political dynamics but relies mostly on individual experiences.[121]

---

[115] Dan Gudgeon, "Fateful moments", pp. 1-12.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid., p. 3.
[119] Adam B. Lerner, "The politics of trauma and victimhood," pp. 147-162.
[120] Ibid., p. 149
[121] Adam B. Lerner, "The politics of trauma", pp. 147-162.

The other scholarly tradition on collective trauma is defined by Lerner as the "cultural trauma tradition".[122] This approach emphasizes the social construction of trauma and understands its political impact through the constant social reproduction and commemoration. Accordingly, this tradition can better serve the study of the impact of collective trauma on international politics because it allows scholars to refer to the public representations and narratives of trauma in public media, political discourse or government documents.[123]

Nevertheless, Lerner suggests employing a synthetic approach that merges both the psychology of trauma and the social construction of trauma.[124] In order to become collective, trauma needs to resonate with individual experiences. If not, collective trauma can be contested by those who think their experiences have been improperly exploited.[125] When contestations take place, an experience cannot be perceived as collectively traumatic. In the aftermath of traumatic encounters, collective trauma narratives connect individuals' personal experiences with one another, even when these connections are not methodologically rigorous or logically accurate.[126] Narratives can create new meanings and contextualize past trauma and turn it into a mobilizing rationale.

While Lerner understands trauma as a potential mobilizing resource in present time, Phuong A. Nguyen, emphasizes how states also try to mediate trauma's challenges to the future Self. According to the author, traumatic memories are "unresolved and emotionally charged recollections of historical injustice" unlike other types of more coherent and constructed collective memory.[127] Because trauma cannot be easily contained in narratives, it causes ontological insecurity.[128] In other words, traumatic memories disrupt the linear progression of time and sense of temporal continuity, as they resurface frequently and unpredictably.[129]

As it remains unresolved, trauma requires another form of management than that used for other types of collective memories. Political actors construct alternative versions of the Self, defined by the author as "temporal others", which are morally distant from the present and future Self to be rejected. Nguyen highlights the fact that states do not only try to protect the current state's identity but also construct legitimate futures selves to maintain continuity and legitimacy in a process defined as "anticipatory temporal Othering".[130] The author emphasizes how the Othering can also have a temporal element and not only involve differentiation in spatial terms.

[122] Ibid., p. 151.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Adam B. Lerner, "The politics of trauma", pp. 147-162.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Phuong A. Nguyen, "Engaging with *Temporal Others*", p. 633.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid., p. 634

Nguyen argues that the Self and Other are not only constructed on physical and cultural differences, but also on how the present state identity relates to its past one. These two types of Othering can coexist.[131]

Therefore, ontological security does not only have to do with memories of the past, but also influences the way states try to mediate the future identity challenges caused by unresolved trauma. States try to do that through narratives of denial, reframing or partial acknowledgement to avoid undesirable future selves. The concept of trauma is strictly tied to those of victim and victimhood. According to Lerner, present narratives of past traumas often focus on labels like victim and perpetrator with the goal of gathering sympathy for certain actors and blame for others to legitimize specific policies.[132]

Kathrin Bachleitner points out that after the end of World War II, the conceptualizations of victim-perpetrator replaced the dichotomy of victor-defeated common in the 19th century. With the new narratives, the perpetrator was perceived as responsible for attacking a weaker, harmless, and innocent victim.[133] The concept of victim identity derives from post-conflict studies. A victim is a social label that identifies someone that has suffered a crime or other misfortunes for reasons outside of their control.[134] The label comes with a series of expected behaviors namely being helpless and vulnerable.

On the other hand, collective victimhood is constructed, and it is not an objective label like the individual victim.[135] The Other does not necessarily perceive that group as a victim. Because these labels can extend beyond those directly involved in the past violence, the status of being a victim becomes independent from specific instances, and victims' complaints and resentments can be applied to any Other.[136] Collective victimhood thus becomes a powerful label that allows for the construction of a collective identity. However, with a collective victim there also needs to be a perpetrator, and an Other. This creates a constant state of conflict as the collective victimhood depends on the construction of the Other as the perpetrator.[137] Civil wars are an example of this dynamic. They put pressure on the collective identities by threatening the existence of social groups and by blurring the distinction between victim and perpetrator. Therefore, to secure their identities, groups create objects of fear creating recognizable threats to attack.[138]

---

[131] Ibid.
[132] Adam B. Lerner, "The politics of trauma", pp. 147-162.
[133] Kathrin Bachleitner, "Diplomacy with Memory: How the Past Is Employed for Future Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no.4 (2019): 492–508.
[134] Alexander Oaten, "The cult of the victim: an analysis of the collective identity of the English Defence League," *Patterns of Prejudice* 48, no.4, (2014): 331–349.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Adam B. Lerner, "The politics of trauma", pp. 147-162.
[137] Alexander Oaten, "The cult of the victim", pp. 331–349.
[138] Noga Glucksam, "I fear, Therefore I am", pp. 89-108.

## 1.6 Memory Contestation and Transitional Justice

As discussed so far, memory is a political phenomenon. It is both constructed and constructive. While the state has the monopoly on the control of collective memory and owns enough resources to maintain it over generations through mnemonic practices, other non-state actors also play a role in the politics of memory. They can do so through the construction of alternative memories that interact with, contest, influence and eventually change mainstream narratives.[139] These sub-narratives then should not be considered more "authentic" than mainstream ones, as they also are influenced by power politics.[140]

Because of its social and political nature, memory is inherently dynamic and contested both domestically and internationally. As a matter of fact, memory politics can be defined as a multi-sited and multi-sided struggle between a multitude of actors with competing memories of the past that aim at gaining, consolidating, and expanding power in the present by selecting only those events that can be functional to the present.[141]

This is particularly true for democratic societies. While in an authoritarian system, collective memory and narratives are heavily centralized by the state, in democracies, non-state actors such as civil right advocates and museum workers can influence memory politics if they have the necessary resources.[142] Political parties can also impact memory politics with specific narratives of the past that align with their political goals.[143] Moreover, globalization and the new technologies of communication make alternative collective memories more easily diffused and shared across borders and across different ethnic, national and cultural groups.[144]

As Kocan points out, democratization is a crucial theme in the analysis of memory politics particularly with reference to the Third Wave of democratization to which South Korea belongs.[145]

---

[139] Armen Hovhannisyan, "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy", p. 36; Aline Sierp, "The politics of memory", pp. 1464-1483.
[140] Uwase N. Mutoni, "The Role of Memory", pp. 169-176.
[141] Aline Sierp, "The politics of memory", pp. 1464-1483.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Faris Kocan, "Collective memory and an interpretative approach", pp. 200-217; Samuel Huntington (1991) identified a pattern of democratization in modern history, divided into three "democratic waves" with "reverse waves" in-between. The first democratic wave began in the 1820s, with wider male suffrage in the United States, and continued until 1926, resulting in the establishment of 29 democracies worldwide. However, the first wave ended in 1922, with the rise of dictatorships, such as the fascist regime in Italy, marking the beginning of the first "reverse wave", which reduced the number of democracies back to 12 by 1942. A second wave of democratization began with the victory of the Allied forces in WWII, reaching its peak in 1962 with 36 democratic countries. This second wave, however, was followed by a second reverse wave (1960-1975), reducing the number of democracies down to 30. Lastly, from 1974 through the 1990s, democratic transitions spread to Southern Europe, including Spain, Portugal and Greece, Latin America, and to Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Asia, rapid economic growth in countries like Taiwan, and South Korea, created the economic basis for democratic transition during this third wave. See Samuel Huntington (1991).

During a political transition from an autocratic to a democratic regime, questions on how to manage the former's responsibilities and how to treat the perpetrators eventually become necessary issues to address.[146] Democratization can thus encourage reinterpretations of the past of the newly democratized societies as their national identity changes.[147]

Transitional justice can play an important role in democratic transitions. Maria Mälksoo defines it as a multidisciplinary approach aimed at addressing previous international crimes and human rights violations in post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts by using a combination of judicial and nonjudicial instruments, such as Truth (and Reconciliation) Commissions (TRCs).[148] Thanks to the support from the United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Truth Commissions have come to be perceived as a way to aid peaceful and democratic consolidation, and are now recognized as a standard of transitional justice.[149]

Truth Commissions are established by a presidential or royal decree or a peace agreement but only for a limited time. They are generally employed in combination with other instruments such as criminal trials and international criminal courts, depending on the different social contexts.[150] Commissions are constituted by various commissioners, ranging from politicians to human rights activists, but are distinct from courts, since they are not meant to rule over the individual responsibility of perpetrators.[151] This lack of judicial power has often sparked controversies across national contexts.

Truth Commissions have to find a balance between the demands for procedural justice and the need to reinforce social trust to help consolidate democracy. The purpose of these non-judicial organizations is to construct an historical narrative about past events and thus actively participate in the formation of collective identity by creating an "imagined moral community".[152] Enhancing peace and democracy by addressing past grievances entails a social transformation of conflictual identities. However, adopting new relations that contradict common behaviors is not always easy to achieve due to ontological security.[153] This is related to the fact that transitional justice understood as an "international normative domain" challenges a state's goal of maintaining a certain status and recognition both domestically and internationally, creating anxiety about the

[146] Mark Arenhövel, "Democratization and transitional justice," *Democratisation* 15, no. 3 (2008): 570-587.
[147] Faris Kocan, "Collective memory and an interpretative approach", pp. 200-217.
[148] Maria Mälksoo, "The transitional justice and foreign policy nexus", p. 373; Anne K. Krüger, "From Truth to Reconciliation: The Global Diffusion of Truth Commissions," In *Reconciliation, Civil Society, and the Politics of Memory*, ed. Birgit Schwelling (Transcript Verlag, 2012), pp. 339-367.
[149] Anne K. Krüger, "From Truth to Reconciliation", pp. 339-367.
[150] Mark Arenhövel, "Democratization and transitional justice", pp. 570-587.
[151] Anne K. Krüger, "From Truth to Reconciliation", pp. 339-367.
[152] Ibid., p. 343.
[153] Noga Glucksam, "I fear, Therefore I am", pp. 89-108.

unreliability of the international system and the relationships with others. The international normative expectations can thus become identity threats.[154]

By using the case of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Noga Glucksam argues that the practice of transitional justice can fail to achieve the objective of addressing identity insecurities.[155] In that case, the TRC process allowed Liberians to reconstruct their ontological security based on an exclusionary victim identity. Claiming victimhood became necessary to understand the past, to attribute blame, and to restore a coherent self-image, but it also solidified boundaries between victims and "non-victims" and limited opportunities for recognizing complex identities.[156]

In conclusion, coming to terms with the past is not limited to the domestic context but impacts on foreign policy as well. According to the literature on memory and conflicts, depending on the narratives employed, memory can either be a tool for reconciliation or it can bring back to surface past conflicts as it is often the case in East Asia.[157] Mälksoo identifies two types of approaches to transitional justice namely a reflective approach, and a mnemonic security-oriented approach. The reflective approach tends to adopt a range of transitional justice measures that allow for a more cooperative foreign policy posture. On the other hand, the mnemonic security-oriented approach leads to alter specific understandings of the past in the state's collective memory in order to maintain "a particular perception of the state's past self intact and secure for the present needs".[158] This often results in a more defensive, self-assertive foreign policy behavior.

## 1.7 Methodology

This study contributes to the literature of memory politics in East Asia by analyzing the impact of the trauma and collective memory of the Korean War (1950-1953) on inter-Korean relations, which is an issue that is often under-researched compared to the role of memory in the historical disputes between South Korea and Japan. By focusing on how past traumas and conflicts affect states' ontological security, which in turn can influence collective memory-constructing

[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Aline Sierp, "The politics of memory", pp. 1464-1483.
[158] Maria Mälksoo, "The transitional justice and foreign policy nexus", p. 375.

narratives, and eventually foreign policy, this thesis can offer an analytical framework applicable to other contexts of division, foreign occupation, and transition to democracy.

This research draws on both constructivist and interpretivist approaches using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main analytical tool because it considers discourse as "socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned", and its purpose is to uncover the power relations manifested in the language.[159] This approach makes it possible to highlight the deeper meanings of language used in public discourse to investigate how state actors, namely presidents, construct the Self (South Korea) in opposition to the Other (North Korea). CDA also enables the investigation of how and to what extent South Korean state leaders employ narrative change or create "fateful moments" to justify specific policies or postures towards North Korea across the selected time periods.

As Michael Meyer points out, there is not a single agreed-upon data selection and analysis methodology in CDA given that it is generally problem-oriented.[160] Therefore, the linguistic categories and conceptual tools are selected depending on the specific social problem to be addressed. Many scholars analyze discourse using pronouns, attributes, and verbal time, mode and tense. For instance, Siegfried Jäger analyses the implicit meanings and insinuations, the symbolism and metaphorism, as well as idioms, vocabulary, style and clichés.[161] Teun Van Dijk, on the other hand, focuses more on stress and intonation, choice of topic, lexical style, and word order.[162]

This thesis identifies the recurring themes, symbols and narratives present in public discourse, through Dian and Kocan's categorizations of glorification, self-victimhood, amnesia, acknowledgement and contrition. To do so, particular attention is given to the choice of lexicon, specifically nouns, verbs and adjectives used to describe past events, traumas, groups of people, and single individuals like national heroes and victims. The use of metaphors will also be examined.

Some of the strategies usually employed by a CDA's discourse-history approach are particularly relevant for this study and could be used to identify the categories. These strategies include *nomination*, where the employed linguistic tools include membership categorization and metaphors, classifying individuals or groups of people into specific social identities (i.e. Us vs Them), *predication* through the use of "stereotypical and evaluative attributions of positive or

---

[159] Jan Blommaert and Chris Bulcaen, "Critical discourse analysis," *Annual review of Anthropology* 29, no.1 (2000): 448.
[160] Michael Meyer, "Between Theory, Method, and Politics: Positioning of the Approaches to CDA," In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Michael Meyer and Ruth Wodak (SAGE Publications, 2001), 1-15.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.

negative traits" (i.e. glorification and self-victimhood), *argumentation* using common argument patterns to persuade the listener (i.e. acknowledgment and contrition and/or fateful moments), and *mitigation and intensification* emphasizing or downgrading specific events and actions (i.e. amnesia, glorification, and/or victimhood).[163]

Data will include transcribed presidential speeches, and texts collected from museum exhibitions. In order to more clearly identify narrative continuities and discontinuities, a balanced number and similar type of sources from each period will be selected. Furthermore, the analysis will focus on material that is explicitly related to the memory of the Korean War, national division and perceptions of North Korea.

This study acknowledges that selecting documents produced or translated from Korean into English can possibly limit the understanding of cultural nuances. This limitation will be partly addressed by relying on case-specific literature, in line with CDA's discourse-historical approach, where the historical context is always integrated into the analysis.[164]

Lastly, although the thesis recognizes the relevance of non-state actors in shaping national memories, most attention is given to how collective memory and trauma are constructed by state actors. This decision is justified by the fact that the narratives produced and sustained by state actors are more directly identifiable through public discourse, public media and official documents. To account for the role of civil society, the thesis will investigate the extent to which exhibitions at the two state-sponsored museums, namely the War Memorial of Korea and the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History in Seoul account for an interaction between state discourse and multiple contesting narratives.

[163] Ibid., p. 11.
[164] Michael Meyer, "Between Theory, Method, and Politics", pp. 1-15.

# CHAPTER 2

# State Narratives and National Identity From the Wartime to the Present Day

## 2.1 The Korean War and National Division

The origins of the Korean War can be traced back to the period of political and social tensions following Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule on August 15, 1945. The Korean War is often considered the first and large-scale military conflict of the Cold War as it contributed to shaping competing ideological identities in Northeast Asia, and crystallized the division of the Korean Peninsula, whose repercussions still play a crucial role in the present day.[165]

In 1943, the leaders of China, the United States and Great Britain, Chiang Kai-Shek, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill respectively, met in Cairo to discuss the future of Asia and particularly that of Japan. On December 1, they agreed with a joint statement that the Korean Peninsula would eventually gain its freedom and independence "in due time".[166] The intention of installing a five-year joint trusteeship was announced in December 1945, causing widespread opposition within the Korean people.[167]

As the Soviet Union began to occupy the northern part of the Peninsula, after declaring war against Japan on August 8, 1945, the United States was worried by the prospect of a Soviet occupation of the entire Peninsula. Therefore, Washington proposed to Moscow to temporarily divide the Peninsula along the 38th parallel.[168] This demarcation line was delineated arbitrarily based on what two American officers, Charles Bonesteel and Dean Rusk, proposed, which ignored the historical context as well as Koreans' desire for autonomy.[169] Surprisingly, Stalin agreed to the proposal, hoping to play a role in the occupation of post-war Japan, and to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States.[170]

---

[165] Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea: an episodic narrative* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 205-209; Samuel S. Kim, *The two Koreas and the great powers* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-37.

[166] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale: dal 1945 ai giorni nostri* (Il Mulino, 2010), 90-135.

[167] Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea,* pp. 205-209.

[168] Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea dalle origini ai giorni nostri* (Bompiani, 2018), 1-569.

[169] Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea,* pp. 205-209.

[170] Ibid.; Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 309.

Following liberation, local grassroots self-governing bodies known as People's Committees were being formed in the northern and southern parts of the Peninsula. In the South, this initiative was led by Lyuh Woon-hyung, a moderate leftist politician, who formed the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence, which later led to the establishment of the People's Republic of Korea (PRK) on September 6, 1945.[171] The members of these committees belonged to diverse political factions, including socialist and communist ones, and lacked a common ideological agenda. Within this new political setting, the figure of nationalist and anti-communist Rhee Syngman started to emerge.[172] The People's Committees, as well as the newly established Republic were not recognized by the United States, which feared communist infiltrations, and instead created the United States Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), which strongly repressed leftist and even moderate political opposition.[173]

On the other hand, the Soviet Union not only recognized the local political committees in the North led by Cho Man-sik but also decided to leverage them to strengthen Moscow's influence. However, Cho became progressively marginalized because the Soviets did not consider him as the ideal candidate to lead a future state, due to his anti-communist stance. Instead, they decided to support Kim Song-ju, who will later change his name to Kim Il-song, as the new leader of the northern regime. Kim had fought against the Japanese imperial forces in Manchuria and was considered more reliable and better suited for the position, due to his favorable ideological positioning.[174] Eventually, the Soviet recognition of the committees in the North set the stage for the establishment of the Workers' Party of Korea.[175]

The U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission that was in charge of finding a compromise on the creation of a unified government in Korea was not reaching any positive outcome. Therefore, in November 1947, under pressure from the United States, the United Nations formed the UN Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) to solve this stalemate and lead to elections.[176] However, the Soviet Union and the Northern regime opposed this decision and banned the UNTCOK from entering the northern zone of Korea. Therefore, on May 10, 1948, elections were held solely in those areas accessible to UN observers, namely the U.S.-controlled southern part of Korea.[177]

---

[171] Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 309.

[172] Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea,* pp. 205-209.

[173]Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale,* p. 89.

[174] Ibid., p. 85.

[175] Ibid., p. 90.

[176] Ibid., p. 92.; Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 312.

[177] Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 312.

The first National Assembly was elected with 200 members, and on July 20, Rhee Syngman was elected President of the newly established Republic of Korea (ROK), officially proclaimed on August 15.[178] Many Koreans strongly opposed this election because they feared that it would prolong national division. On March 1, on the commemoration day of the independence movement on the island of Jeju, a demonstration opposing the elections was brutally repressed by the police and by the right-wing paramilitary forces.[179] The opposition to the elections and to the division of the Peninsula, which was further exacerbated by increasing inflation, poverty and unemployment, turned the protests into a civil insurrection, which later spread to the rest of the southern part of the Peninsula.[180] The uprising of students, intellectuals and armed farmers was violently suppressed by the ROK and U.S. authorities, which in Jeju caused an estimated 30.000 deaths, corresponding approximately to 12% of the local population.[181] On top of the victims in Jeju, the repression of civilians conducted in the South between May 1948 and April 1950, and justified with the anti-communist rhetoric, caused an estimated 36.000 deaths, 45.000 destroyed houses, and 432.000 forcefully displaced individuals.[182]

In the meantime, elections for the Supreme People's Assembly were held in the North and on September 9, 1948, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was formally proclaimed with Kim Il Sung as its leader.[183] By the end of 1948, therefore, the division of the Peninsula was permanently solidified with the establishment of two antagonistic governments.

While the underlying causes of the conflict are still debated, the conventional and long held explanation argues that the war was triggered by North Korea's invasion across the 38th parallel in the morning of June 25, 1950. In fact, the common term for the conflict among Koreans is "Six-Two-Five" (*Yug-i-o*).[184] However, prior to that, there had been repeated and continuous skirmishes along the border.

Kim Il Sung believed that the war would be short because he was sure that he could get support from the Soviet Union, and from the communist forces within the South Korean society, including the guerrilla fighters in the mountains.[185] In February 1949, the North Korean leader met Stalin to obtain military backing from the USSR, but the Soviet leader refused, fearing the

---

[178] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale,* p. 93.

[179] Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 312.

[180] Ibid., Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea*, pp. 205-209.

[181] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale,* p. 96; Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 312.

[182] Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 312.

[183] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale.,* p. 93.

[184] Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea,* pp. 205-209.

[185] Ibid.

possibility of a U.S. intervention, and arguing that the military capabilities of the North lacked the necessary military superiority over the South.[186] While strengthening North Korean defensive military capabilities through the delivery of armaments and military equipment, Stalin insisted on reducing tensions between the North and South. Moscow even tried to stop North Korea's counterattacks against the South, during the skirmishes along the border.[187]

However, after repeated discussions and initial reservations, Stalin eventually approved Kim Il Sung's plan, making it conditional on getting backing from Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who agreed.[188] According to Zhihua Shen, one of the various reasons behind Stalin's change of mind was his interpretation of the apparent U.S. disengagement from East Asia (for instance U.S. Secretary of State, Dean Acheson's decision to exclude Taiwan and South Korea from the United States' defense perimeter in the western Pacific) as an indication that the United States might not intervene militarily in the eventuality of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula.[189]

Moreover, the rise of communist China, and the subsequent Sino-Soviet alliance also played a crucial role in the change of Stalin's view.[190] In particular, the North's invasion of the South was considered as a way to preserve Soviet interests in East Asia. In fact, with the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, the USSR had given up its control over Manchuria, particularly Lushun, Dalian, and the Chinese Eastern Railway, which granted Moscow access to warm-water ports.[191] Stalin believed that a unified communist Korean Peninsula would have ensured the Soviet Union's access to the ports of Pusan and Incheon, making up for the loss of Lushun and Dalian.[192] Furthermore, while the addition of China to the communist bloc meant a changing balance of power favorable to the Soviet Union, Stalin also wanted to limit the growing influence of the PRC.[193]

After the launch of the invasion, within three days the North Korean forces quickly occupied Seoul, forcing the South Korean government to flee to the Southern city of Pusan.[194] The United States quickly intervened, sending their troops stationed in Japan, while the United Nations

---

[186] Ibid.; Zhihua Shen, "Sino-Soviet relations and the origins of the Korean War: Stalin's strategic goals in the Far East," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2, no. 2 (2000): 44-68.

[187] Zhihua, Shen, "Sino-Soviet relations", p. 48

[188] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale*, pp. 90-135.

[189] Zhihua, Shen, "Sino-Soviet relations", pp. 44-68.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid., p. 68.

[192] Ibid., p. 60.

[193] Ibid., p. 68.

[194] Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea*, pp. 205-209.

released a resolution demanding the North Korean troops to withdraw, and recommending that the UN member states provide assistance to South Korea to repel the armed attack through a unified command under the United States.[195]

As the UN forces had been pushed into the Pusan Perimeter, General MacArthur planned a surprise landing in the port city of Incheon, known as the "Incheon landing", to overturn the military deadlock and force the North Korean troops into retreat.[196] Following the victory, the American and South Korean troops continued their advance beyond the 38th parallel, reaching the Yalu River on the border with China. This forced China to intervene, sending around 260.000 "volunteers", pushing the allied forces back to the 38th parallel.[197]

Eventually the conflict stalled along the initial demarcation line for two years due to disagreements mostly regarding the repatriation of the prisoners of war.[198] During the stalemate the United States decided to change strategy and intensified the bombings and military operations to pressure the communists at the negotiating table. Eventually, the change of leadership in the United States with the coming to power of President Eisenhower, and in the Soviet Union with the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953, changed the view of both powers on the issue of the exchange of prisoners, speeding up the negotiations.[199] The armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, although the South Korean president Rhee refused to sign it, as he would have wanted to keep fighting to achieve unification by force.[200]

---

[195] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale,* p. 100.

[196] Kyung M. Hwang, *A History of Korea*, pp. 205-209.

[197] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale*, p. 103; Initially, many members of the Chinese Communist Party were reluctant to intervene in the conflict as they believed that China lacked the military capabilities to confront the United States. Nevertheless, Mao argued that China had the responsibility to defend a fellow socialist state and the international communist revolution. Moreover, the Chinese leader believed that confrontation with the United States had become inevitable, and viewed the conflict as part of a broader war against U.S. imperialism. Eventually the crossing of the 38th parallel and subsequent advance towards the Yalu river by the South Korean forces and the U.S.-led UN troops convinced China to intervene in the defense of its borders. Even if the United States did not directly attack China, the prospect of the American military presence in a hostile U.S.-backed regime in the Peninsula would have threatened Chinese national security. The intervention was also motivated by the perceived Chinese fear of U.S. encirclement in the region, considering for instance their support of Taiwan and of the nationalist faction led by Chiang Kai-shek in the Chinese civil war against the communist forces. See Yufan Hao, and Zhihai Zhai, 1990.

[198] Ibid., p. 104

[199] Ibid., p. 105; Maurizio Riotto, *Storia della Corea*, p. 322.

[200] Antonio Fiori, *L'Asia orientale*, p. 105

## 2.2 The Wartime Construction of the Self

As the dynamics of the Korean War show, the conflict cannot be understood outside the context of the Cold War, and this is also true for the war narratives. As Kang Hye Yun points out, while the global hegemonic Cold War narratives and the Korean War narratives are not identical, they are deeply intertwined.[201] In South Korea, both narratives were intensified and enhanced together, resulting in the country's anti-communist discourse, which continued to characterize the post-war period.[202]

In particular, the United States' narrative of Othering between the "civilized Anglo-Saxon" and the "Russian-Asiatic" world, was entangled with the narratives of guerrillas, acting outside the sphere of civilization, and were then localized in the Korean context.[203] This resulted in the creation of local enemies, often targeting civilians and guerrilla fighters, alongside the external enemy identified with the Soviet Union.

In both South Korea and the United States, the war was also narrated as a struggle for the survival of the "free human race". As it will be shown in the analysis of President Rhee Syngman's statements, in the ROK, the conflict was also framed as a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union, between which Koreans, as victims, were unjustly caught up.[204]

Narratives of the Korean War exemplify the process of ontological security seeking, explaining anti-communism as the subject formation of post-war South Korea. It is important to analyze narratives of the Korean War during the conflict, because in such times of crisis, the state identity is yet not clearly defined, and the public sphere is in a transitional phase. In particular, the political and discursive space is still being formed and differs from normal politics.[205] This period of crisis set the stage for the phases that will be analyzed in the next sections, following the end of the conflict and the crystallization of national division.

According to Kang, during times of conflict, such as civil wars, ontological security studies alone cannot explain whose ontological security is being pursued, because they do not account for the role of non-state actors and local fragmented sub-narratives in the creation of the national

---

[201] Hye Yun Kang, "Narratives of Crisis: Korean War Narratives and the Subject Formation of South Korea," *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2025): 1-10.

[202] Ibid., p. 5.

[203] Ibid., pp. 1-10.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Ibid., p. 6.

Self, and their interaction with the hegemonic narrative.[206] According to the author, the anti-communist narratives of the Cold War became hegemonic in wartime South Korea thanks to the interaction with the fragmented local actors' narratives.

Local agents like local militias, villages and other interest groups, were interacting with the global Cold War narratives, through which they constructed their subjectivity, and in doing so, the bipolar confrontation's narratives became dominant. In other words, local disputes over power and land created tensions among local groups and villages, which were often reflected in the central political conflicts.[207] At the same time, central nationalist actors adopted the hegemonic Cold War narratives for their own interests. Therefore, as explained in Chapter 1, the interaction between mainstream- and sub-narratives are essential in the formation of a national identity and for the pursuit of ontological security.

The statements by President Rhee that are analyzed in this section clearly illustrate the nationalist right-wing narratives of the war, particularly that of anti-communism. This narrative is constructed through a process of Othering between what are identified as the Northern and Southern Soviet-backed communists, and the Korean nation, and is emphasized by narrative strategies of glorification and victimization.

Connected to these narratives is the theme of unification and the perceived unjust decision to divide the Peninsula along the 38th parallel against the will of the innocent Korean people. Lastly, another central theme in the documents is the framing of the Korean War as a struggle to preserve the "free world" against what is identified as the evil of communism. Within this narrative, the United States, and by extension the United Nations, are depicted as the saviors of Koreans and protectors of the free world.

Through the CDA approach, the chapter takes into consideration a letter written by President Rhee, addressed to President Truman, and dated July 19, 1950, that has been retrieved from the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Historian's website.[208] The second document, accessed through the same source, consists of a press release delivered on October 30, 1950.[209]

The analysis identifies linguistic tools such as nomination, and in particular membership categorization, which classifies individuals or groups of people into specific social identities, for

[206] Ibid., pp. 1-10.

[207] Ibid., p. 8.

[208] "The President of the Republic of Korea (Rhee) to President Truman", Office of the Historian, July 19, 1950, accessed August 22, 2026, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d326

[209] "The Chargé in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State", Office of the Historian, October 30, 1950, accessed August 22, 2026, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d720

instance constructing the dichotomy of Us vs Them. The use of stereotypes and evaluative positive or negative attributions, and mitigation and intensification, emphasizing or downgrading specific events and actions are also taken into account.

### 2.2.1 The Narrative of Victimhood

In his letter to President Truman of July 19, 1950, President Rhee repeatedly constructs the Other through terms such as "cruel aggressor", "comminazis", "the communists", "Soviet-sponsored regime in North Korea" and "enemy". On the other hand, the Self is identified generally as the people of Korea.[210] In particular, Rhee explicitly states that "the people of North Korea are the same as the people of South Korea" distinguishing them from what he calls the "few minor exceptions of foreign-trained and foreign-directed communists". Therefore, in opposition to the collective Self of Korean people, the Other can be broadly identified with "the communists", in line with the hegemonic nationalist and rightwing narrative.

This process of Othering is intertwined with narratives of victimization, wherein North Korea is not only the "cruel aggressor", but also the "slave Korea". The repeated use of adjectives such as "few", "minor", "exceptions" and "foreign", as well as the verb "directed", might imply a mitigation attempt to minimize the agency of the Korean people, while emphasizing that communism was imposed on them from an external force, as something exogenous from the nation.

The attempt to portray communism as a phenomenon totally foreign to Korea is even clearer in the following metaphors: "the cancer of imperialist aggression", and "the malignant growth artificially grown within the bosom of our country by the world communists".

Therefore, Rhee frames the war not as "a conflict between North and South" but "between the few who are communists, who by accident got control of half of our country", and the "overwhelming mass of the citizens of Korea". Again, the adverbial phrase of "by accident" might indicate an attempt to emphasize the construction of Koreans as victims.

### 2.2.2 The Theme of Unification

Deeply tied to the narrative of victimhood is the theme of unification, which is more evident in Rhee's press release of October 30, 1950. Here, the president explicitly states that "the

[210] "The President of the Republic of Korea (Rhee) to President Truman". As the original text is in English, direct correspondence with the Korean terms cannot be verified.

Korean people are homogeneous people", and that "the tragic division of the country at the 38th parallel was not of Korean doing or choice", because "the hated Communist regime oppressed our fellow countrymen in the North".[211] In this passage as well, the president minimizes Koreans' agency and demonizes the communist regime, framing it as the oppressor of the whole Korean nation.

This narrative further advances the construction of the national Self in two ways: first, by differentiation with the communists, and then by a collective identification with the oppressed northern Koreans. In the press release, the construction of a collective identity is also achieved through the repeated use of words like "home", "ancestral residences in the northern part of the Peninsula", and "our northern borders" when referring to North Korea, claiming them as part of a single nation.

The goal of unification was also stated in the ROK Constitution that was promulgated on July 17, 1948. According to Sarah Son, this was an attempt to appeal to the notion of a Korean-ness based on a single ethnicity and race (*Han-Minjok*) that was temporarily erased during the Japanese occupation.[212] The nation was believed to be collective and natural, characterized by a shared genealogy.[213] However, the geopolitical context made it necessary to construct opposing ideological national identities.

### 2.2.3 The United States and the United Nations as the Protectors of the Free World

The United States and the United Nations are also framed in opposition to the communist Other. In both statements, President Rhee explicitly expresses his gratitude to the United States and President Truman for their support to the Republic of Korea during the war. The language used in both documents can be interpreted as a way to frame the United States and the United Nations as the saviors of Korea and the protectors of the "free world".

The narrative of glorification can be clearly identified in both texts. In his letter to President Truman, Rhee defines himself as "deeply moved" by the American casualties in the conflict, and states that:

---

[211] "The Chargé in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State".

[212] Sarah Son, "South Korean national identity and inter-Korean relations since 1945," In *Routledge handbook of contemporary South Korea*. Ed. Sojin Lim, and Niki J.P. Alsford (London Routledge, 2021), p. 4; Iain Watson, "Cultural identity and securitising the Korean Peninsula: Transformations in the South Korean security narrative," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 3 (2012), p. 438.

[213] Sarah Son, "South Korean national identity", p. 4.

> No Korean can ever forget the courage and sacrifice of these men, who in the great traditions of the United States of America, have come to the defense of the weak against the cruel aggressor.[214]

With the words "in great traditions", Rhee emphasizes the perceived global role of the United States as protector of freedom and independence worldwide. This is further highlighted in the following sentence:

> They [the Americans] have given their lives even beyond the love of their country as citizens of the world, knowing that to permit the further destruction of the independence of free nations by the Comminazis is to clear the way to assault upon every nation, even the United States.[215]

In this way, the war is framed not only as a tragic conflict for the Korean people, but also as a fight against communism and a threat for the entire world, including the United States. Glorification referring to the United States and UN forces is also present in Rhee's remarks during the press conference, where he described their military campaign as "superb", and General MacArthur's leadership as "inspired".[216]

It is also worth pointing out that, while Rhee repeatedly expressed his gratitude towards the United States and the United Nations, he did oppose at first the armistice agreement put forward by the Allied forces. In a speech on June 25, 1953, addressing the nation, Rhee compared the signing of the armistice to a "death warrant". He urged the nation to stay united "in action and speech" and to refuse the armistice. He stated that doing otherwise "we [the Korean people] will have to face death".[217]

## 2.3 The Post-War Military Regimes

As a peace treaty could not be signed, national division progressively deepened following the armistice agreement, strengthening the antagonistic identities of the two states. Sarah Son argues that, since 1948, both states have created nation-building narratives that construct certain

---

[214] "The President of the Republic of Korea (Rhee) to President Truman".

[215] Ibid.

[216] "The Chargé in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State".

[217] "Rhee tells countrymen to scorn armistice pact", Stars and Stripes, June 25, 1953. Accessed on August 22, 2026, https://www.stripes.com/news/1953-06-25/rhee-tells-countrymen-to-scorn-armistice-pact-1873781.html1

aspects of North and South Korean-ness as distinct from each other.[218] Because of the notion of a shared ethnic and cultural identity, the identity of both Korean states depends on the construction of the other as the foreign and illegitimate one.[219] This has created a condition of perpetual insecurity for both Koreas, which continues to impact inter-Korean relations today.

The literature agrees in identifying economic reconstruction, rapid industrialization, and anti-communism as the main focus of the conservative narratives of the military regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Do-Hwan.[220] The analysis will focus primarily on Park Chung-hee's statements because the identity narratives put forth during his regime are particularly significant given that they highlight the dual role of anti-communism in re-framing the change in inter-Korean policy and as a legitimizing tool for his leadership.

In May 1961, General Park took power with a military coup, justified by the need to clear up corruption and temporarily stabilize the political and social unrest, which, according to Park, could have been used by North Korea as an opportunity to get involved in the country's domestic affairs.[221] Besides declaring martial law, the military arrested all those who were deemed "problematic", including politicians, professors, and journalists. Moreover, the new regime dissolved the National Assembly, and formed the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), a new secret police organization in charge of repressing the opposition.[222] However, in 1963, after increasing pressure from the United States to end martial rule, Park Chung-hee retired from the military and, contrary to what promised, ran for presidency as a civilian in the newly indicted presidential elections. Although he was elected president by only 32 percent of popular vote, his party was able to win a majority of seats in the National Assembly, thanks to a system that privileged the party winning a plurality of votes.[223] Moreover, the junta had excluded many of Park's rivals from the electoral race. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Park was supported by many Koreans who searched for stability, including not only right-wing business owners and military figures, but also by many poor Koreans who considered the opposition as an elite disconnected from the problems of the ordinary people.[224]

---

[218] Sarah Son, "South Korean national identity," p. 4.

[219] Iain Watson, "Cultural identity", pp. 429-454.

[220] Kevin Gray, "Inter-Korean relations and the end of peaceful reunification: a social conflict approach," *The Pacific Review* (2026), pp. 1-27.

[221] Mark Peterson, *A brief history of Korea* (Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 216.

[222] Ibid.

[223] Ibid.

[224] Ibid.

After taking power, Park launched a program of rapid industrialization and export-led economic growth based on central planning and led by the Economic Planning Board.[225] The latter resembled Japan's Ministry of Trade and Industry, as Park's economic strategy was based on the Japanese model.[226] As in Japan, the government directly invested in big family-led industrial conglomerates (called *zaibatsu* in Japan and *chaebol* in South Korea), which entertained close relations with the government.[227] For instance, to increase exports, the regime offered various incentives to companies that met their export targets, provided tax exemptions for exporters, and set import quotas and restrictions to safeguard local manufacturers.[228]

During his rule, Park launched four five year plans. The first one between 1962 and1966 laid the foundation of South Korea's development by focusing on providing electricity, fertilizer, petroleum, and cement, whereas in the second five-year plan (1967–1971) the regime emphasized the production of steel, chemicals, and machinery.[229]

According to Lee Seungik, in the early 1970s, the state-led economic growth began to slow down, causing dissatisfaction and anger among those who had been marginalized by these policies. The unrest within the working class and the rise of popularity of the opposition leader Kim Dae-jung motivated Park Chung-hee to enact the so-called Yusin reform. The latter amended the constitution to provide the legal basis for Park's lifelong military rule.[230] The reform was proposed after the announcement of a nationwide state emergency on October 17, 1972, and was approved on October 21 with a national referendum by 91.5%.[231] Nevertheless, it is most unlikely that this number reflected a transparent vote, as the Yusin Constitution promulgated in December

---

[225] Seongji Woo, "The Park Chung-hee administration amid inter-Korean reconciliation in the détente period: Changes in the threat perception, regime characteristics, and the distribution of power," *Korea Journal* 49, no.2 (2009), pp. 37-58.; Mark Peterson, *A brief history of Korea* (Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 219.

[226] Mark Peterson, *A brief history of Korea* (Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 219; The influence of the Japanese model on South Korea's economic growth traces back to the South Korean economic system during Japanese occupation. See Mark Peterson, 2009.

[227] Ibid.; While this economic model led to a rapid economic growth, it also caused widespread corruption, due to the close relations between the *chaebols* and members of the bureaucracy and government, wherein well-connected conglomerates received preferential access to investments. At the same time, government officials profited from their connections with businesses. See Mark Peterson, 2009.

[228] Ömer Naim Küçük, and Metin Yücekaya, "State responses to oil crisis in oil-dependent developing countries: South Korea and Turkey after the 1973 oil crisis", *International Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no.1 (2024): 77-91.

[229] Mark Peterson, *A brief history of Korea* (Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 220.

[230] Seungik, Lee, "Everyday life during Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship in South Korea after the 1972 Yushin Constitution," *Politeja* 1, no. 95 (2025): 57-71.

[231] Ibid., p. 61.

included provisions such as the abrogation of the presidential direct election system, and the abolition of term limits for the president. The new constitution also granted the president the power of dissolving the National Assembly and appointing judges.[232] Therefore, from 1972 until Park's death in 1979, South Korea experienced a "full-scale military dictatorship".[233] The regime further strengthened its repression on political opposition, committing human rights violations including resorting to torture. Park's anti-communist narrative was used to target domestic political dissidents, pro-democracy activists, labor union organizers, student protesters, and progressive intellectuals, and was supported by the idea of a pan-Korean ethnic unity against communism.[234] The Yusin reform was framed as the only way to protect the nation against the communist threat coming from the northern regime.[235]

At the same time, during these years, the regime continued to launch its five-year plans (the third between 1972 and 1976, and the last one between 1977 and 1981) focused on heavy industry, including machinery and chemicals, shipbuilding, transportation, and household electronics.[236] As a result of these policies, the country experienced exceptional economic growth, often referred to as the "miracle on the Han river". Between 1972 and 1979, the economy registered a growth rate of 11%, and South Korean exports peaked to 10 billion dollars for the first time.[237] Like the Yusin reform, the economic reconstruction was also framed as a way to protect the country against communism.[238]

According to Woo Seongji, for Park Chung-hee in the 1960s the matter of unification was not as relevant as that of economic growth.[239] As North Korea's incursion attempts along the Demilitarized Zone rose to 736 in 1961, the Kim Il Sung's regime was perceived as a security threat towards the ROK.[240] Accordingly, Park Chung-hee's foreign policy was focused on supporting the American ally with the fight against communism. The clearest example is South

[232] Ibid., p. 63

[233] Ibid., p. 59.

[234] Kevin Gray, "Inter-Korean relations", p. 15.

[235] Seungik, Lee, "Everyday life during Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship", p. 59; Seongji Woo, "The Park Chung-hee administration", p. 46.

[236] Mark Peterson, *A brief history of Korea* (Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 220.

[237] Seungik, Lee, "Everyday life during Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship", p. 59.

[238] Dan Gudgeon, "Fateful moments", pp. 1-12.

[239] Seongji Woo,"The Park Chung-hee administration", p. 46.

[240] Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads, Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (Colombia University Press, 2018), pp. 20-82.

Korea's participation in the Vietnam War through the deployment of South Korean troops, beginning in 1964.[241] Throughout the duration of the war, the total number of South Korean soldiers dispatched to Vietnam amounted to around 50,000.[242] In exchange, the United States provided economic and military aid to South Korea, contributing to the country's economic growth and development of military capabilities.[243]

However, after Pyongyang's failed assassination attempt against president Park at the Blue House in 1968, and following the seizure of the U.S. intelligence ship USS Pueblo just two days before, the Johnson administration did not show its support to Park's regime, who felt disappointed by the U.S. appeasement stance toward North Korea.[244]

The lack of trust towards the United States and the fear of abandonment grew in the early 1970s. In particular, the Nixon Doctrine announced in 1969, and the possibility of the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea were perceived by Park as a sign of decreasing U.S. security commitment with the ROK and the other U.S. regional allies.[245] The U.S.-China normalization of diplomatic relations in 1971 was also perceived as a shock by the South Korean regime, which began efforts to develop more independent military capabilities.[246] As a reaction to the perceived unreliability of the United States, between late 1971 and 1972, Park's regime even secretly attempted to develop an independent nuclear program, which was later aborted, but seriously damaged the bilateral relations with the American ally.[247]

In the meantime, as the regime's opponents proposed policies of national reconciliation, Kim Dae-Jung advocated for a more proactive policy towards the North, which was viewed as a challenge to Park's leadership.[248] On top of the changes in the international order, domestic pressures contributed to a shift in Park Chung-hee's policy towards North Korea to a policy of peaceful reunification.

---

[241] Ibid., p. 29; Tae Yang Kwak, "The Nixon Doctrine and the Yusin reforms: American foreign policy, the Vietnam War, and the rise of authoritarianism in Korea, 1968–1973," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 12, no.1-2 (2003): 33-57.

[242] Tae Yang Kwak, "The Nixon Doctrine and the Yusin reforms", p. 34.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Seongji Woo,"The Park Chung-hee administration", p. 40.

[245] Ibid., p. 41.

[246] Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*., p. 36.

[247] Ibid.; Seongji Woo,"The Park Chung-hee administration", p. 43.

[248] Seongji Woo,"The Park Chung-hee administration", p. 46.

In particular, the July 4 South-North Communiqué was the first attempt of inter-Korean cooperation since the armistice agreement.[249] The Communiqué included three principles of national reunification: i) independence from external influence, ii) peace, as in the refrain from using military force; and iii) national unity that transcends ideas, ideologies and systems. Through these three principles, both governments agreed to refrain from military provocations, prevent military clashes, facilitate bilateral exchanges, and organize Red Cross talks.[250] Nonetheless, the agreement failed to produce long-lasting results. According to Woo, Park did not actually believe that dialogue alone would achieve unification, thus he focused mostly on less political issues, such as family reunions.[251]

The domestic and international factors that have been outlined so far may not be sufficient to explain how Park managed to shift South Korea's official policy towards the North from confrontation to cooperation without challenging South Korea's ontological security. In fact, the analysis of selected speeches by President Park Chung-hee suggests that specific narratives were used to justify this policy change in order to preserve the anti-communist element of national identity.

The following speeches will be discussed: the "Statement on the 22nd Anniversary of the Korean War" of June 25, 1972; the "Special Statement on Peace Unification Diplomacy Policy" of June 23, 1973; and the "Special Statement by the President on the Lifting of Emergency Measures No. 1 and No.3" of August 23, 1974.[252]

### 2.3.1 Ontological Security-Seeking Narratives: Framing Peaceful Unification

The speech of June 25 of 1972, pronounced not long before the July 4 Joint Declaration, presents a narrative of Othering by antagonizing the North Korean regime as "North Korean

[249] Ibid., p. 38.

[250] "July 4 Joint Statement of 1972", KBS World, 8 March 2018, https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=history&id=&board_seq=8

[251] Seongji Woo,"The Park Chung-hee administration", p. 47.

[252] "Statement on the 22nd Anniversary of the Korean War", Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives, June 25, 1972, accessed August 22, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp; "Special Statement on Peace Unification Diplomacy Policy", Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives, June 23, 1973, accessed August 22, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1306400; "Special Statement by the President on the Lifting of Emergency Measures No. 1 and No.3", Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives, August 23, 1974, accessed August 22, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1306448

puppets" (*bukgoe*) and instigators of the "surprise nationwide invasion of the Republic of Korea, thereby bringing about the catastrophe of fratricide".[253]

Park Chung-hee states multiple times that the North Korean regime's apparent efforts towards bringing peace to the Peninsula were lies and refers to them as "peace propaganda" (*pyeonghwa seonjeon*), explicitly stating that:

> No matter how much the North Korean puppets engage in peace propaganda right now, it is nothing more than false propaganda devoid of truth.

The president also argues that although for "some foreigners", it might have seemed like North Korea had changed, that was not true because according to him:

> Our people, who personally experienced the tragedy of the Korean war, hold a completely different view from foreigners who are unaware of our tragic past. [...] None of us can easily forget that pain, that shock, and that anger.

In this passage, he appeals to the collective memories of the war by framing them as a shared tragedy that only Koreans can understand. By contrasting the "authentic" Korean experience with the more limited understanding of "foreigners", the shared pain, shock, and anger are used to construct a collective identity of victimhood.

This narrative is reiterated in June 1973, one year after the July 4 South-North Communiqué. President Park states that the efforts to open dialogue with North Korea had been led by him and his regime "to alleviate the suffering of our fellow countrymen".[254] This frame supports the legitimacy of the regime in the South, and suggests continuity with former president Rhee's narrative of ethnic unity while differentiating between the communist regime and the fellow North Korean people.

This interpretation is supported by Park's repeated use of expressions such as "our homeland" (*urineun joguk*), "our nation split against our will" (*uriui uisae banhayeo guktoneun yangdandoego minjogeun bunyeoldoeeosseumnida*), "our compatriots" (*dongpo*), and "our fellow countrymen" (*dongpo*), when referring to North Korea and North Korean people. In his speech he also addresses the public as "dear compatriots of the South and North" (*chinaehaneun nambuk dongpo yeoreobun*).

---

[253] "Statement on the 22nd Anniversary of the Korean War". The term "*bukgoe*" also simply translates to "North Korea". The romanization of Korean characters follows the system of Revised Romanization of Korean.

[254] "Special Statement on Peace Unification Diplomacy Policy".

At the same time, similarly to the previous speech, the North is framed as the primary cause of the start of the Korean War and national division, as well as the failure of peace efforts. For instance, President Park states that "due to North Korea's refusal, free elections were held only in South Korea". He identifies the cause of the war as the "unjust invasion of North Korean communist forces". Furthermore, he argues that "the North has continued actions that effectively solidify the division of the homeland externally".

The possible challenge to ontological security posed by the policy of peaceful unification is mediated by reaffirming the construction of North Korea as the enemy, in line with the established identity narrative. This is further emphasized by the statement that the policies are "provisional measures for the transitional period until unification is achieved", and they "by no means constitute our recognition of North Korea as a state". In fact, acknowledging North Korea would challenge the narrative that South Korea is the only legitimate government of the Peninsula and thus it would cause ontological anxiety.

Furthermore, Park Chung-hee refers multiple times to the "international situation" and a "series of developments in this region" to explain the need for such a policy, also appealing to South Korea's international image and recognition to justify the policy change. He explicitly states that:

> When I soberly assess the current domestic and international situation facing our homeland, I am convinced that this is the only shortcut to independently achieving the peaceful reunification of our country, while maintaining the dignity and pride of our nation amidst the international trend of détente.

Taken together, it seems like the main narrative in both statements is that, although the international situation allowed for dialogue in the years of the Cold War détente, South Korea needed to stay vigilant to the perceived and constructed North Korean threat. This framing maintained continuity in the anti-communism narrative, and is clear in the following passage:

> We must not be deceived in the slightest by the North Korean puppets' disguised peace offensive; the more they spread propaganda, the more vigorously we must exert our sincere efforts towards peaceful unification[255]

[255] "Statement on the 22nd Anniversary of the Korean War".

### 2.3.2 Anti-Communism as a Tool of Regime Legitimization

In the statement of August 23, 1974, the framing of communism as a threat to the stability of the South Korean government and state can be clearly identified.[256] In particular, the president refers to the assassination attempt on him during the ceremony for the 29th Liberation Day, where his wife eventually lost her life. The shooter, named Moon Se Kwang, was a 23-year-old Korean that had long resided in Japan, and was described as a radical leftist.[257]

While Park Chung-hee frames the event as an "immeasurable shock and surprise", he argues that it was actually not "entirely surprising", as he claims that it is clear that it was an attack of the "North Korean communists" (*bukangongsanjuuija*) with the "clear goal of overthrowing our government and communizing the Korean Peninsula". In his speech, the president repeatedly states that following the armistice, and even during the inter-Korean dialogues, North Korean "armed spies" (*mujanggancheop*) were sent to South Korea to "incite civil unrest" and plot the "overthrow of the government and a national upheaval".

Therefore, Park Chung-hee justifies the use of "extraordinary measures" (*gingeupjochi*) to counter these attacks, downplaying the regime's responsibilities, and shifting the blame to North Korea. He states:

> In order to crush these wicked schemes of theirs, the government had no choice but to take extraordinary measures, sometimes against its will or knowing that it might be misunderstood by some.

and:

> There were people who did not clearly know what goals the North communists were pursuing [...] and even misunderstood the government's emergency measures as if they were intended to suppress the people.

At the end of his speech, Park Chung-hee announces the lifting of the emergency measures, after arguing that "national unity has been firmly solidified through this incident". However, he reminds the citizens of the always imminent threat and invites the nation to "unite firmly in the spirit of total harmony and wisely overcome internal and external challenges".

---

[256] "Special Statement by the President on the Lifting of Emergency Measures No. 1 and No.3".

[257] "South Korea: The Accidental Assassination", Time, August 26, 1974, https://time.com/archive/6878054/south-korea-the-accidental-assassination/

The 1972 and 1973 speeches reframed anti-communism to make it compatible with the policy of peaceful reunification, by distinguishing between the Korean people, presented as a single ethnic community, and the North Korean regime, constructed as the illegitimate and dishonest enemy. On the other hand, the 1974 statement employed the same narrative to legitimize the emergency measures and the repression of domestic opposition.

In conclusion, the three statements illustrate how cooperation and dialogue towards the North, and in particular the July 4 South-North Communiqué, were framed in a way to conserve the construction of South Korea as the only legitimate representative of the Korean nation. They also indicate that anti-communism provided a legitimizing narrative for Park Chung-hee's repressive regime, in which the contradicting narratives of pan-Korean-ness and anti-communism became more evident.

## 2.4 Democracy and Narrative Contestation

The democratic transition that gradually unfolded in the late 1980s contributed to the transformation of South Korean memory politics. Following democratization, former anti-authoritarian and pro-democracy movement leaders were brought into mainstream electoral politics, leading to persistent disagreements with conservative forces particularly on inter-Korean relations and U.S.-ROK relations, and creating new constraints on foreign policy implementation.[258]

Generally, progressives' memory narratives have been people-oriented and have emphasized the anti-colonial aspect of South Korean identity, while framing North Korea as the other legitimate state on the Peninsula. On the other hand, conservatives have tended to glorify South Korea's past, including the military-backed regimes, while framing North Korea as the existential enemy of the Republic of Korea.[259]

The economic transformations brought by the industrialization policies of the Park Chung-hee's regime nurtured the emergence of the pro-democracy social forces that would drive the mass-democracy protests that eventually challenged the hegemonic narratives put forth by the military-backed regimes.[260] Those pro-democracy actors included students, intellectuals, workers

[258] Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads*, p. 55.

[259] Myungji Yang, "Camouflaged extremism: Authoritarian legacies and the far right in South Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 57, no. 3 (2025): 392-412.

[260] Kevin Gray, "Inter-Korean relations", pp. 1-27.

and trade unions, religious groups and civic organizations, and can be grouped within the so-called *minjung* movement.[261]

The literature identifies the emergence of a "historiographical revolt" of leftist scholars in the 1980s, who sought to challenge the conservative right's narratives of the past, emphasizing the illegitimacy of the Korean state.[262] The postwar regimes had merged (anti-imperialist) nationalism with anti-communism through the narrative of anti-Soviet resistance, creating a hegemonic discourse, where South Korea was the only legitimate state of the Korean nation.

Conversely, communism was framed as anti-national, due to its association with the Soviet Union and the so-called Soviet "puppet-state" in the North.[263] However, in the 1980s, this discourse started to show its contradictions, as the leftist scholars sought to delegitimize the Right by exposing its members' collaboration with foreign powers, namely colonial Japan (*chinilpa*, literally "pro-Japanese faction") and the United States (*chinmipa*, literally "pro-American faction"). These accusations harmed the conservatives' nationalist credentials.[264]

The Left's narrative separated the nation from the state, wherein nationalism granted them legitimacy, whereas the Right became associated with the delegitimized state.[265] According to the leftist narrative, the Korean nation was dependent on the United States, due to the collaboration with the conservative elite following the end of Japanese colonial rule. Therefore, the dictatorship had to be overthrown for the Korean nation to gain true autonomy.[266]

Anti-American sentiments further spread among students and intellectuals following the brutal massacre of pro-democracy protesters by General Chun Doo-hwan in the city of Gwangju from May 18 to May 27, 1980.[267] Under the 1953 U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, the South Korean military fell under the Operational Control of the United States-Republic of Korea Combined Forces Command, which was headed by a U.S. general. Therefore, the lack of

---

[261] Ibid.; Myungji Yang, "Camouflaged extremism", pp. 392-412.; The *minjung* (common people/masses/nation) movement was not a structured organization, and did not only include anti-government activities, but also encompassed various aspects of cultural, public and academic life. The movement represented the desire to regain people's autonomy and freedom of expression. See Kyung M. Hwang, 2010.

[262] Sungik Yang, "An Old Right in New Bottles: State without Nation in South Korean New Right Historiography," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 4 (2021): 889-909.

[263] Ibid.

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid., p. 892.

[266] Ibid.

[267] Kyung M. Hwang, pp. 1-309.; Scott Snyder, South Korea at the Crossroads, p. 70.

intervention from Washington to block Chun from slaughtering civilians came to be perceived by the local people and democracy activists as betrayal and complicity by the United States.[268]

The Gwangju Uprising sparked widespread pro-democracy movements across the country and contributed to the transition to democracy, which finally took place following the "1987 June Uprising". The regime had to concede to virtually all of the pro-democracy movement's demands and was forced to call for direct presidential elections.[269] Due to a divided opposition that failed to unite on a single candidate, Roh Tae-woo, who had been hand-picked by Chun Doo-hwan to be his successor, won and became South Korea's first directly and popularly elected president following decades of indirect rule.[270]

Given Roh's links with the previous regime, democratization was perceived as incomplete. The newly elected president lacked strong legitimacy, also considering the fact that he won over the pro-democracy opposition candidates, Kim Young-Sam and Kim Dae-Jung, by a small margin (36.6% of the total votes).[271] Furthermore, Roh's party did not gain a majority in the National Assembly. However, the support from the highly centralized elite bureaucracy that had been shaped by his authoritarian predecessors insulated Roh's foreign policy from public opinion.[272]

The Nordpolitik was the main foreign policy that guided his approach to inter-Korean relations.[273] It focused on enhancing inter-Korean exchanges, including trade and reunion of divided families, and encouraged North Korea's economic and diplomatic relations with South Korea's allies. Roh took advantage of the changing international conditions following the end of the Cold War and the demise of the USSR.

North Korea lost much support from China and Moscow, and thus Pyongyang could no longer leverage these relationships to pressure South Korea. The Nordpolitik led to inter-Korean talks, which resulted in the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation of 1991, and the January 1992 Inter-Korean Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The latter called for the denuclearization of the Peninsula by limiting the use of nuclear energy for peaceful use only although it soon turned into a dead document in practice.[274]

---

[268] Ibid.

[269] Kyung M. Hwang, pp. 1-309.

[270] Ibid.

[271] Scott Snyder, South Korea at the Crossroads, p. 71.

[272] Ibid.

[273] The term "Nordpolitik" derives from the Ostpolitik proposed at the beginning of the 1970s by the West German leader Willy Brandt. See Scott Snyder, 2018.

[274] Scott Snyder, South Korea at the Crossroads, p. 68.

The Nordpolitik was also a policy of diversification of South Korea's foreign relations as Seoul was seeking more autonomy and independence from the United States on matters of inter-Korean relations, while still preserving the U.S.-ROK alliance. It was built on previous diplomatic initiatives towards China and the Soviet Union led by Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. The 1988 Olympic Games had been a precious occasion to showcase South Korea's economic modernization to the world and facilitated South Korea's rapprochement towards Beijing and Moscow.[275] Diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union were normalized on September 30, 1990, and formal diplomatic relations with China were established on August 24, 1992.[276]

### 2.4.1 The 386 Generation

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of the so-called "386 generation", which included those who had taken active part in the 1980s pro-democracy movements. Yang Sungik notices how for the first time, the former democracy activists gained influence in mainstream politics, as they were recruited by the opposition political parties. According to Choi, the latter constituted the main counter-hegemonic forces that sought to challenge the hegemonic political discourse. These included the liberal nationalists, independent nationalists, and labor activists.[277]

Liberal nationalists were the most influential as they were led by Kim Dae-jung, a veteran opposition leader who spent decades fighting military dictatorships before eventually being elected president in 1997.[278] These pro-democracy forces had a different vision for inter-Korean relations. They called for peaceful reunification on the basis of a national identity focused on the idea of ethnic brotherhood, pacific coexistence and reconciliation. Therefore, unlike the previous governments, unification was not to be completed through absorption.[279]

Following his election, which marked the first change of power from the ruling to the opposition parties, Kim Dae-jung transformed his long-held vision for inter-Korean relations into South Korea's official foreign policy, famously known as the Sunshine Policy. It was based on

---

[275] Ibid., p. 33.

[276] Ibid., pp. 58-64.

[277] Sungik Yang, "An Old Right in New Bottles", p. 400; Yong S. Choi, "Kim Dae-jung and the persistence of anti-communist hegemony in South Korea," *Asian Studies Review* 41.2 (2017): 299-316.

[278] Sunhyuk Kim, *The politics of democratization in Korea: The role of civil society*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.

[279] Kevin Gray, "Inter-Korean relations", p. 14.

three basic principles to manage relations and reduce tensions with North Korea: (i) rejecting unification by absorption of the North by the South; (ii) not tolerating North Korean armed provocations; and (iii) promoting inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation. In addition, it followed six operating principles including the separation of economics from politics and flexible reciprocity.[280]

According to Choi Jong Kun, the Sunshine Policy was more than a foreign policy as it represented an attempt to change South Korea's national identity.[281] As Choi Yong Sub argues, the liberal nationalists perceived and framed North Korea as an equal country, and thus inter-Korean relations had to follow the principles of mutual respect of sovereignty.[282] This narrative strongly differed from the construction of North Korea as the "communist threat", and became a powerful counter-narrative, because it aligned with aspirations within the South Korean society.[283]

Unlike the Park Chung-hee's era, where cooperation with North Korea had to be re-framed to safeguard South Korea's ontological security, and the legitimacy of the regime, the national liberals' idea of unification through engagement had a wider popular support and aligned with their identity narratives. Nevertheless, according to Yong Choi, the Sunshine policy, which was continued by the succeeding progressive government led by President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), failed to produce long-term positive impacts on inter-Korean relations for several reasons.

First, although democratization limited the power of the military and gave more freedom to political opposition, the institutions and laws tied to national security remained intact.[284] Therefore, the perceived and constructed North Korean threat has continued to be used to

---

[280] Norman D. Levin, and Yong-Sup Han, *Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate over Policies Toward North Korea* (RAND Corporation, 2002), 23-32.; The separation of economics from politics meant that the private business sector would have a greater margin of freedom when taking decisions on investment and trade with the North, while the government's role would be mostly limited to issues of humanitarian assistance. In practice, this meant that economic relations would not depend on the North's cooperation in other areas. According to the principle of flexible reciprocity, South Korea would give North Korea an undetermined time in the future to reciprocate its measures. This principle was applied to areas such as building social infrastructure, while for humanitarian assistance, the South would not request anything in return. For the private sector's trade, in principle the government would not be involved (Norman D. Levin, and Yong-Sup Han, 2002).

[281] Jong Kun Choi, "Sunshine over a barren soil: the domestic politics of engagement identity formation in South Korea," *Asian Perspective* 34.4 (2010): 115-138.

[282] Yong S. Choi, "Kim Dae-jung", p. 305.

[283] Ibid., p. 310.

[284] Ibid.

challenge the policies of the progressive governments.[285] The National Security Law, introduced in 1948 under Rhee Syngman to respond to threats from North Korea, and which was in practice used to suppress leftist opposition, has never been revoked. The law has been criticized by human rights civic groups and organizations like Amnesty International for not respecting international human rights standards, and for being used to justify silencing domestic opposition.[286] Its declared objective is to "secure the security of the State and the subsistence and freedom of nationals, by regulating any anticipated activities compromising the safety of the State."[287] An "anti-state group" is defined as a "domestic or foreign organization or group which uses fraudulently the title of the government or aims at a rebellion against the State, and which is provided with a command and leadership system".[288] Among the most criticized provisions are articles that punish those who praise, sympathize or aid an anti-state group, or those who are in contact with a member of such an organization, offering them money and providing a place for hiding and meeting (articles 7, 8, and 9).[289]

The second reason for the limited impact of the policy of reconciliation pursued by Kim and Roh is that the approach depended on external factors, including the international context and the state of U.S.-North Korea relations, forcing the South Korean governments to compromise on some of the principles outlined in the original Sunshine Policy.[290] Therefore, the cyclical and highly fluctuating pattern of denuclearization talks as well as inter-Korean relations has limited the creation of a nationwide consensus over Kim Dae-jung's policy of reconciliation and cooperation with the North.

The emergence of the "New Right" in the early 2000s clearly shows how the anti-communist logic did not disappear from South Korea's memory politics. In fact, it was reformulated. The term "New Right" identifies a bottom-up conservative movement that aimed to re-establish the Right's and the state's legitimacy in response to the challenges represented by the Left's narratives in the 1980s and the policies of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun.[291]

---

[285] Chien-peng Chung, "Democratization in South Korea and inter-Korean relations," *Pacific Affairs* 76.1 (2003): 9-35.

[286] Diane Kraft, "South Korea's National Security Law: A tool of oppression in an insecure world," *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 24, no.2 (2006): 627-659.

[287] "National security act", Korea Legislation Research Institute, accessed September 21, 2026, https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=26692&lang=ENG

[288] Ibid.

[289] Ibid.; Diane Kraft, "South Korea's National Security Law", p. 629.

[290] Yong S. Choi, "Kim Dae-jung", p. 305.

[291] Sungik Yang, "An Old Right in New Bottles", pp. 889-909.

Yang Sungik argues that, although the New Right did not last long in party politics, it proved more influential in the realm of historiography.[292] It tried to construct a new national identity, by promoting a revisionist narrative of the military regimes and of the Japanese colonial rule, highlighting the latter's positive impacts on South Korea's economic development.[293] In this regard, the proponents of colonial modernization theory argued that the management of the economy during the Japanese occupation paved the way for the subsequent development of capitalism, therefore, denying any viable legacy for modern economic growth left by the late Joseon period (17th-19th century).[294] This undermined the legitimacy of the independence movements that emerged during the colonial era, and "the shared claim by North and South of their respective state's origin".[295]

Moreover, this narrative was perceived to legitimize the military regimes, considered the successors of that colonial system.[296] The New Right argued that South Korea was able to achieve a market economy and become a liberal democracy only thanks to the earlier state-interventionism of the dictatorial regimes.[297] This served as a justification for their support of liberal democracy and free market economics, while simultaneously approving of the statism of the military regimes. According to these revisionist far-right scholars, this was the only effective approach in a poor country facing economic constraints and exposed to attacks from North Korea.

The New Right's ideology shares some similarities with the conservative hegemonic narratives of the military regimes, including framing the opposition as "pro-communist" and "pro-North". However, unlike the previous discourses that equaled the notion of the state to that of the nation, the New Right placed the role of the state over the role of the nation as the main subject and portrayed the state as the sole protector of the nation against communism. This is because the Left had monopolized the ethnic and anti-imperialist nationalism.

Moreover, the New Right's emphasis on South Korea's capitalist system served to further frame South and North as two separate entities.[298] For instance, in 2008, the conservative Lee Myung-bak's administration sought to reframe August 15th—traditionally celebrated solely as Liberation Day—around the concept of a "National Foundation Day" to mark the 60th

[292] Ibid., p. 890.

[293] Kevin Gray, "Inter-Korean relations", p. 16.

[294] Sungik Yang, "An Old Right in New Bottles", p. 900.

[295] Ibid.

[296] Ibid.

[297] Ibid., p. 890.

[298] Ibid.

anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Korea. That controversy was spurred by the New Right's efforts to promote a distinct South Korean nationalism, rather than a pan-Korean nationalism based on the idea of an ethnic Korean-ness.[299] It showed the conflict between two different narratives of Korean history and identity, one based on the ethnic nation, and one centered on the state.

According to Yang Myungji, the South Korean post-1987 far right is situated within a reactionary environment influenced by the Cold War anti-communist narratives.[300] As Yang Sungik points out, the governing elites of the military regimes largely maintained their power after democratization.[301] Within this ecosystem, as an intellectual and cultural force, the New Right movement has contributed to the restoration and reformulation of conservative narratives while coexisting with other (far-)right forces that include the People Power Party (PPP), which has been the denomination of the mainstream conservative party since 2020, and its predecessors, government agencies like the Prosecutor's Office and the national intelligence agency, as well as conservative evangelical churches and civic organizations.[302]

To sum up, the transition to democracy spurred changes in the perception of national security, which began to be associated not only with regime survival, but also with the wellbeing of its citizens.[303] Conservative and progressive governments alike started to give more importance to South Korea's perceived international standing and contribution to global peace. National identity, national interests, and in turn South Korea's North Korea policy began to be influenced by political contestation between the conservative and liberal political wings[304].

[299] Kevin Gray, "Inter-Korean relations", p. 17

[300] Ibid.

[301] Sungik Yang, "An Old Right in New Bottles", p. 394.

[302] Myungji Yang, "Camouflaged extremism", pp. 392-412.

[303] Chien-peng Chung, "Democratization in South Korea", pp. 9-35.

[304] Kevin Gray, "Inter-Korean relations", p. 14.

### 2.4.2 Kim Dae-jung's "Government of the People" and the Minjok.

This section analyzes Kim Dae-Jung's presidential inauguration speech of February 25, 1998, as well as his commemorative speech for the 79th anniversary of the March 1st Movement.[305]

Kim's presidential inauguration speech titled "Let us open a new era of overcoming national crises and leaping forward" clearly illustrates a change of identity narratives from the anti-communist discourses of the past military-backed regimes.[306] A few recurring themes of the South Korean progressive political and social forces can be isolated in the speech.

The president centers his discourse on the people, and praises their efforts in achieving the establishment of the "true government of the people" (*jinjeonghan 'gungminui jeongbu'*). This expression, as well as the word "people" (*gungmin*) is repeated multiple times throughout the speech, and he personally addresses them as "respected and beloved fellow citizens" (*jongyeonghago saranghaneun gungmin yeoreobun*).[307] Kim's gratitude towards the nation is marked by expressions such as "I offer my praise and gratitude to the people", and "offering all glory and blessing to you, the people, I firmly pledge to serve you with my whole body and soul". Throughout the statement, the president identifies himself with the nation by using the pronoun "we" (*uri*).

Kim Dae-jung repeatedly describes his election as an "historic day" (*yeoksajeogin nal*) and a moment of "historical significance" (*yeoksajeogin uimi*) as it marks the first peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition. The narrative and form of the speech align with the liberal and progressive's people-oriented approach that prioritize the nation over the state.

The de-legitimization of the state is also a recurrent leftist narrative. However, in this speech, rather than delegitimizing the South Korean state as such, Kim's discourse delegitimizes the authoritarian form of the state, and presents his democratic government as the true legitimate representation of popular sovereignty.

---

[305] "The 15th Presidential Inaugural Address (Let Us Open a New Era of Overcoming National Crises and Leaping Forward)", Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives, February 25, 1998, accessed August 25, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp; "Commemorative Address for the 79th Anniversary of the March 1st Movement (Overcoming National Crises through the Spirit of Great Unity of the March 1st Movement)", Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives, March 1, 1998, accessed August 25, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1308527.

[306] "The 15th Presidential Inaugural Address".

[307] The term *gungmin* means people or citizens. It differs from the word *minjok*, which emphasizes the ethnic nation.

The president distances his government from the previous administrations, which he describes as corrupt and in collision with the private sector. Instead, he frames his election as "the birth of a government that seeks to develop both democracy and the economy simultaneously". This intention is best captured in the expression "small but powerful government" (*jakjiman gangnyeokan jeongbu*). This frame suggests an attempt to delegitimize the statism of the military regimes, which centralized control over the economic development of the country while suppressing the citizen's civil and political rights.

Another important theme in the speech is the Asian financial crisis that had just hit South Korea. Kim describes the crisis as "the greatest national crisis since the Korean War", and situates it within a broader historical narrative.[308] In particular, the South Korean past is glorified and used to mobilize the people to cooperate and work together to face the crisis, encouraging them to be "patriotic". The president states that:

> Even amidst today's difficulties, the people have demonstrated remarkable patriotism and resilience. We have achieved the great feat of a peaceful transfer of power between the ruling and opposition parties, even amidst the shock of the IMF era. To overcome the national crisis, the people set out on a "gold collection campaign" and have already gathered over 2 billion dollars worth of gold.

and in concluding his speech he states:

> Five millennia of history is watching over us. The spirit of our ancestors is encouraging us [...] just like our proud forefathers who saved the nation [...] our people can do it. The history of rising from the ruins of the Korean War proves it [...] let us once again elevate the glory of the republic of Korea!

This narrative creates an historical continuation that equates the nation's achievements from the country's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, to the peaceful transfer of power with Kim

[308] The Asian financial crisis began in Thailand in July 1997 with the depreciation of the baht, which then affected other Southeast Asian currencies and eventually hit South Korea. The president at the time, Kim Young-sam, was forced to ask for a loan to the International Monetary Fund. The bailout of 57 billion dollars was granted to South Korea on the condition that it would implement economic reforms and restructuring. The loan was then repaid in August 2001, under the administration of Kim Dae-jung, nearly three years ahead of the original schedule. The crisis revealed serious structural problems affecting the South Korean economy, such as under-performing loans, many of which were given by the government to the large family-owned conglomerates (*chaebols*). Many firms, both small and big, went bankrupt or downsized, resulting in the layoff of thousands of workers (Kyung M. Hwang, 2010).

Dae-Jung's election, and to the gold collection campaign, in the face of the financial crisis.[309] The narrative is also used as a legitimizing tool, as the president blames the policies of the previous governments to be the causes of the crisis. In particular, he states that:

> Had the leaders who have guided politics, the economy, and finance not been tainted by collusion between politics and business and government-controlled finance, and had large corporations not controlled uncompetitive companies like octopuses, these unfortunate events would not have occurred.

And by taking the side of the people, he states:

> I cannot suppress my boundless pain and indignation when I consider that the leadership committed the wrongs, yet the innocent people bear the suffering.

Furthermore, the relevance of globalization in South Korean national identity during the late 1990s and early 2000s can be identified in this inaugural speech. The financial crisis is framed by the president as an opportunity to enhance South Korea's image as an "information powerhouse" (*jeongbodaeguk*) in "an era of new revolution" (*saeroun hyeongmyeong*) and "civilisational shift" (*munmyeongsajeok daejeonhwangi*)[310] to a "knowledge-information society" (*jisikjeongbosahoe*). More specifically he states that:

> We will build the nation that utilizes computers best in the world, firmly laying the foundation for an information powerhouse.

and again,

> We must devote our efforts to the globalization of our national culture. We will inherit and develop the high cultural values embedded in our traditional culture.

[309] During the financial crisis, Korean citizens brought their personal objects, such as jewelry, family heirlooms and cash to collection centers as part of a nationwide mobilization to help repay the IMF loan (Kyung M. Hwang, 2010).

[310] In the sentence: "*urineun iwa gateun **munmyeongsajeok daejeonhwangireul** maja saeroun dojeone jeollyeogeul dahayeo neungdongjeogeuro daeeunghaeya hamnida*" which translates to: "at this **historic turning point** in our civilization, we must respond proactively and devote ourselves fully to new challenges."

When it comes to the foreign policy and approach to inter-Korean relations of his then-recently installed administration, Kim Dae-jung's statement illustrates a change of narrative with regards to national security. While the authoritarian narrative of national security was divisive and ideological, based on anti-communism to legitimize the regime and its repressive policies, President Kim's statement highlights the need to strengthen South Korea's "independent posture based on national unity and a strong military filled with high morale". At the same time, he states that collective security, by "solidifying the ROK-U.S. security system", is also needed. While Kim Dae-jung did not abandon the need to strengthen South Korea's military posture, he detaches national security from anti-communism and situates it within the context of the new democratic system and changed international context, where national security becomes a shared domestic and international need. To achieve it, international cooperation is deemed essential.

This reflects the spirit and the operating principles of the Sunshine policy, which are outlined in his speech. In particular, the president stresses that "reconciliation, cooperation, and the settlement of peace" must be achieved through the implementation of the 1991 Inter-Korean Basic Agreement, and in particular through exchanges and cooperation.

While expressing the resolution of refraining from "harming or absorbing North Korea", Kim Dae-Jung also states that South Korea "will never tolerate any armed provocation". In his speech, the president also expresses his support of exchanges between South Korea's allies, namely Japan and the United States, and North Korea, if "inter-Korean exchange and cooperation are realized".

The language used in his speech suggests that, although the president shows a firm stance against North Korea in relation to its nuclear and military policies, North Korea is not framed as a threat, but as an equal country with whom to cooperate. The president's open approach is clear, for example when he states that: "despite the current economic difficulties", the new government will "not be stingy in providing food aid through reasonable means".

Unlike previous presidential statements, North Korea is not referred to in anti-communist terms but simply with the terms "North Korea" (*bukan*) and "North Korean authorities" (*bukan dangguk*). This might suggest a formal recognition of the North as the other legitimate state in the Korean Peninsula. However, the collective identification with the North seems less clear considering that the North Korean state and the North Korean people are not explicitly framed as separate entities like in the statements previously analyzed in this chapter.

The notion of ethnic unity only emerges when the president refers to the "overseas compatriots" (*haeoedongpodeul*) as "Koreans", which seems to include North Koreans as well. In particular he states that:

> We will actively support overseas compatriots so that they can fulfill their rights and duties as citizens of their countries of residence while maintaining stability and pride as members of the Korean diaspora.[311]

The second speech, the 1998 commemorative address, presents the March 1st Independence Movement as the culmination of the struggle to defend the nation's independence and glory, dating back to the late Joseon Dynasty.[312] In particular, the president emphasizes the "unceasing armed struggle against Japanese imperialism for 40 years" following the Eulsa Treaty.[313]

Furthermore, like in his inaugural statement, Kim creates a connection between the movement, the establishment of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, and the creation of the "democratic republic, the 'Minguk'".[314] He also encourages the citizens to overcome the challenges of the financial crisis by taking example from the "spirit of overcoming national crisis from the March 1st movement".

Although the commemorative speech is dedicated to the memory of the colonial occupation, the historical framework laid out by Kim Dae-jung connects the past to the present and is used as an opportunity to address inter-Korean relations. In particular Kim shares his disappointment towards the fact that "despite the immense sacrifices our ancestors made for the struggle for national independence, the North and South have still not achieved reunification."

Moreover, the president argues that the fact that reunification has not been achieved yet by "the North and South" is something to be ashamed of:

> We do not even know the whereabouts or fate of our separated families. How shameful this is before our ancestors, and how embarrassing it is to face the world.

---

311 The automatic translation is imprecise here because in the original Korean sentence, there is no reference to the "Korean diaspora". The wording used can be better translated to **"as Koreans"**: "urineun haeoedongpodeuri geojuguk simineuroseoui gwolliwa uimureul dahamyeonseo **hangukgyeroseo** anjeonggwa geungjireul gajil su itdorok jeokgeuk dopgetseumnida", which translates to "We will actively support overseas Koreans so that they can fulfill their rights and duties as citizens of their host countries and live with stability and pride as Koreans".

312 "Commemorative Address for the 79th Anniversary of the March 1st Movement"

313 As a result of the Eulsa Treaty signed on November 17, 1905, the Korean Empire was stripped of diplomatic sovereignty and transformed into a Japanese protectorate, paving the way for Korea's formal annexation to Imperial Japan in 1910.

314 "*Minguk*" can be translated to "republic" or "people's country".

Nevertheless, similarly to his inaugural speech, the president does not use hostile language when referring to North Korea and maintains an open approach, stating that: "South and North Korea must respect each other's systems."

At the same time, Kim recognizes that, although division cannot last indefinitely, it is "difficult right now", because, according to him, the priority is to achieve sustainable peace through mutual exchanges and cooperation. He argues that before reunification, "minimal exchange must also happen", the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement must be implemented, and separated families must be reunited, or at least their whereabouts have to be identified.

In this statement, the recognition of the North appears ambiguous, as the shared ethnic community with the North is more explicit here than in the inaugural speech. For instance, the president addresses the public as "the 70 million compatriots in South and North Korea and around the world" (*nambukangwa jeon segyee gyesineun chil cheonman dongpo yeoreobun*), and refers generally to "our people" (*uri minjok*), and "our great ancestors" (*widaehan josangdeul*) when mentioning those who established the Provisional Government, implicitly including North Koreans as well. In fact, the term "minjok" refers to the ethnic nation. On the other hand, Kim later states that his is "the only legitimate government that upholds the legitimacy of the Provisional Government".

In particular, greater emphasis is placed on the role of the South Korean nation in the creation of the Republic of Korea as the direct successor of the Democratic Provisional Government. This illustrates a change of narrative from the Rhee Syngman and Park Chung-hee's regimes.

### 2.4.3 Yoon Suk-yeol and the Persistence of Anti-Communism in Democratic South Korea

This section focuses on South Korea's most recent conservative administration that was led by the prosecutor-turned-politician Yoon Suk-Yeol, who served as president from May 2022 until his removal from office in April 2025. To better evaluate recurring themes as well as shifts in narratives around national identity following the transition to democracy, the analysis will compare his speech for the 104th anniversary of the March 1st Independence Movement of March 1st, 2023, with Kim Dae-jung's commemorative speech of 1998.[315]

[315] "104th Anniversary of the March 1st Independence Movement Ceremony", Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives, March 1, 2023, accessed October 25, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1402194

It can be observed that both addresses mobilize the citizens by appealing to the need to "inherit the spirits of the ancestors" to face the domestic and international challenges of their respective moments. Nevertheless, the two statements frame the independence movement differently, and thus construct different identity narratives.

As said, Kim presented national identity as based on the notion of a shared ethnic and historic community, including both South and North Korea. This narrative reflected the principles of his Sunshine Policy, and framed his government as the successor of the Democratic Provisional Government while distancing it from the past military regimes.

Similarly, Yoon acknowledges the March 1st Movement as the beginning of the struggle to establish a "free democratic nation where the people are the masters", thus framing it as the origin of the democratic Republic of Korea.[316] However, while honoring the contribution of the "patriots" and "martyrs" who fought for independence, he does not make an explicit reference to the traumatic and violent aspects of colonial rule. Instead, Yoon identifies the nation's unpreparedness for the "changes in world history" as the cause of the failure of the movement in achieving independence. This framing shifts the focus from the responsibility of the aggressor to the fragility of the victim.

Moreover, in his speech, Yoon fails to mention explicit memories of the Korean War and of the years of the military regimes. Although the president states that "history must never be forgotten", both the "shameful and sorrowful one", he refers to these memories as "the unfortunate past of our history" in general terms. This framing seems to create distance with this aspect of the past without acknowledging it.

Yoon's narrative of the March 1st Independent Movement is used to justify cooperation with like-minded countries, including trilateral cooperation with Japan and the United States. Such cooperation is deemed necessary to address the numerous crises, which according to the president include the North Korean nuclear threat, and the polarization and fragmentation of South Korean society.

Tighter cooperation with Japan is justified by framing the country as a "former militaristic aggressor" that turned "into a partner that shares universal values" with South Korea, and which "cooperates on security, the economy, and global agenda".[317] The president explicitly states that this cooperation is "by no means different from the spirit of our patriots", whom he argues the

[316] "104th Anniversary of the March 1st Independence Movement Ceremony".

[317] "***ilboneun gwageo gungukjuui chimnyakjaeseo*** *uriwabopyeonjeok gachireul gongyuhago anbowa gyeongje, geurigo geullobeol eojendaeseo hyeomnyeokaneun* ***pateuneoga*** *dwaetseumnida"* translates to: "**Japan** has gone **from being a militaristic aggressor in the past** to a **partner** that shares universal values with us and cooperates with us in security, the economy, and the global agenda."

South Korean nation has to repay, by continuing efforts to "protect and expand freedom and faith in universal values".

Unlike Kim Dae-jung's emphasis on reconciliation, cooperation and peace, Yoon securitizes North Korea, presenting it as a "serious nuclear threat" (*simgakan bukaek wihyeop*) in opposition to the democratic South Korea. Accordingly, the use of words "patriots" (*dongpo*) and "patriotic martyrs" (*sungukseonyeol*) instead of the more inclusive word "ancestors", and "compatriots", together with the emphasis on universal values and international cooperation, might indicate the construction of a separate South Korean national identity.

Kim Dae-Jung's attempt to trace back the independence movement to the late Joseon Dynasty, and his reference to the Korean Empire recognized the shared national identity preceding the division. Conversely, Yoon frames the independence movement as the origin of the democratic South Korean state, while omitting the shared South and North's shared origin from the anti-colonial struggle.

As president, Yoon Suk-yeol often used the anti-communist narrative as a legitimizing tool.[318] The most striking occurrence took place on December 3, 2024 when he shocked the nation by declaring emergency martial law to root out what he called "antistate forces".[319]

Almost all types of protests and rallies were banned, as well as all political activities, including those at the National Assembly. The press was also placed under military control.[320] Because martial law can be lifted following a majority vote in the National Assembly, 199 out of 300 lawmakers were eventually able to enter the main hall of the National Assembly, which was

[318] Hannes B. Mosler, "The far right and democratic backsliding in South Korea: mainstreaming, normalization, and radicalization," *Frontiers in Political Science* 8 (2026): 1-15; In 2023 Yoon had already referred to the opposition with terms like "anti-state forces" and "communist totalitarianism", a frame which progressively intensified throughout his administration. The term "communist totalitarianism" derives from the milieu of a New Right think tank, the Korea Freedom Congress, established in 2017, pointing to the influence of the revisionist movement in Yoon's administration. In fact, Yoon had personal connections with New Right figures who contributed to frame his political strategy, messaging, and views on history and national security (Hannes B. Mosler, 2026).

[319] "Transcript: President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech to declare emergency martial law", Korea JoongAng Daily, December 4, 2024, https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/korea/transcript-president-yoon-suk-yeols-speech-to-declare-emergency-martial-law/12475558

[320] Anna J. Park, "South Korean president declares martial law claiming need to root out 'anti-state forces'", *The Korea Times*, December 4, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20241204/south-korean-president-declares-martial-law-citing-anti-state-forces-threat-to-country

under military blockade, and voted to revoke the decree. On December 4 at around 4:30 am, the Cabinet formally approved the revocation of the decree.[321]

Yoon was impeached ten days later and was arrested on January 15, 2025. Following the failed decree, the Constitutional Court unanimously removed Yoon from office in April.[322] On February 19, 2026, he was convicted of insurrection and other crimes related to his short-lived imposition of martial law and was sentenced to life in prison.[323]

Yoon's declaration of martial law is the latest example of how the anti-communist narrative continues to feature in South Korea's political life, particularly within conservative circles, and employed as a legitimizing tool for autocratic behavior. The speech also highlights the securitization of North Korea, shifting its framing from an external threat, to an internal one. Contrary to expectations, following Yoon's attempted self-coup, many within the conservative People Power Party (PPP) and within South Korean society have continued to support Yoon, demanding his reinstatement. For instance, while the Constitutional Court was reviewing the case of impeachment, the PPP sought to hinder the process by boycotting the confirmation hearing of judges needed to fill the court's vacant judicial seats.[324] Moreover, within civil society, many supporters protested against Yoon's removal. Among the most emblematic episodes was the storming of the Seoul Western District Court on January 19, 2025, when a group of people broke into the building destroying the office equipment and facilities, after learning about the issuance of the arrest warrant against Yoon for leading the insurrection.[325] According to Hannes B. Mosler, this episode resembled the January 6, 2021 assault on the United States Capitol.[326]

---

[321] Koh Ewe, Tessa Wong, Nick Marsh, Jake Kwon and Yuna Ku, "Fear, fury and triumph: Six hours that shook South Korea", *BBC News*, December 4, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c98lygwd837o

[322] "South Korea's President Yoon arrested over short-lived martial law attempt", *Al Jazeera*, January 15, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/15/south-korean-investigators-enter-presidents-home-in-second-arrest-attempt

[323] Yoonjung Seo, Gawon Bae, Mike Valerio and Jessie Yeung. "South Korea's impeached president is removed from office, four months after declaring martial law", *CNN World*, April 4, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/03/asia/yoon-impeachment-verdict-south-korea-intl-hnk

[324] Hannes B. Mosler, "The far right and democratic backsliding in South Korea", p. 9

[325] Eun-gyeong Kim, "Supreme Court Sues Court Riot Convicts for 1.18 Billion Won", *The Chosun Daily*, August, 27, 2026, https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2026/08/27/GTKR6JC53ZBFTGABVUGCGTLV7E/

[326] Hannes B. Mosler, "The far right and democratic backsliding in South Korea", p. 6; The New Right movement has incorporated many elements of American conservatorism, including "Trumpian rhetorical styles [...] MAGA-style baseball caps", and xenophobia targeted towards Chinese nationals, resembling the nativist element of Western far right movements. The Korean flag is also paired with the American one. The establishment in 2019 of the Korea Conservative Political Action Conference as an affiliated institution of the American Conservative Union's

In his martial law speech the president argues that the National Assembly, and the Democratic Party, by cutting budgets for policies, including anti-drug measures, public safety maintenance, and childcare support, and by impeaching prosecutors, ministers, and intimidating judges, have sabotaged the core functions of the state and paralyzed the administration. Yoon describes these actions as reckless, and part of a "legislative dictatorship".[327] He describes them as:

> an act of inciting internal rebellion by trampling the constitutional order of the free Republic of Korea and disrupting the legitimate state institutions established by the Constitution and law.[328]

Yoon argues that the National Assembly has become "a monster" and "a den of criminals" trying to destroy the foundation of liberal democracy and "planning to overthrow" the liberal democratic system. He refers to "antistate forces", "the culprits of the country's ruin", "threats of North Korean communist forces", and "unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang anti-state forces", in opposition to "good citizens".

This narrative of Othering recalls the collective memory of the Korean War without explicitly mentioning it, employing the Cold War anti-communism narratives to justify the emergency measures of martial law. However, because, following democratization, South Korea's national identity has been constructed on the principles of liberal democracy, the constructed justification is not simply the protection of national security, but the protection of the "free Republic of Korea", although the threat of anti-state forces did not correspond to reality.

Furthermore, another noteworthy element is the attempt by the president to assure South Korea's allies and to protect the country's international identity as a contributor to international peace and international cooperation. In particular, Yoon states that the implementation of martial law will not change South Korea's "foreign policy stance of fulfilling its responsibilities and contributions to the international community".

Yoon's statements illustrate the complexity of South Korea's contemporary memory politics, as the national identity is constructed through the interaction of different narratives going beyond the Cold War binary narratives. Yoon's statements highlight the international dimension of South Korean identity, particularly, the increasing importance of enhancing South Korea's contribution

---

Conservative Political Action Conference framework encouraged transnational exchanges between the two conservative movements. See Hannes B. Mosler, 2026.

[327] "Transcript: President Yoon Suk Yeol's speech", 2024.

[328] The transcript was only available in English, therefore reference to the corresponding Korean terms cannot be verified.

to the international order, while at the same time, reframing the previous anti-communist narrative.

The analysis of Kim Dae-jung and Yoon Suk-yeol's statements illustrates the impact of the democratic transition on the Cold War-era binary narratives, which framed South Korea as the innocent victim of the North Korean communist threat. In particular, the first democratic alternation in power in 1997 allowed counter-hegemonic narratives related to the Korean War and national division to gain influence in the public discourse.

Against the background of a transformed international context following the end of the bipolar confrontation, these new narratives contributed to the construction of a different and more complex national identity. Kim's Sunshine Policy reframed North Korea from a communist threat to an equal country, and part of a shared ethnic and historical community.

Amid globalization and a changing international system, South Korea developed new ambitions and pursued broader foreign policy goals including enhancing its image as a responsible actor for the maintenance of peace, and a key player in the global economy. Both statements illustrate the interplay of these narratives.

Yoon's declaration of martial law shows how the anti-communist narrative is still present in South Korea's memory politics, although partially reframed. This reflects the resurgence of far-right discourses and the New Right's attempts since the early 2000s to restore their legitimacy through revisionist narratives of the country's past, particularly the experience of Japanese occupation and of the military-backed regimes.

# CHAPTER 3

# The Impact of Transitional Justice and Reconciliation on South Korean State-Sponsored Museums

## 3.1 Unearthing Silenced Memories amid State Violence, Political Contestation, and Social Unrest

Building on the evolution of state narratives analyzed in the previous chapter, this section examines which historical memories and traumas have been unearthed by mechanisms of transitional justice and reconciliation in order to assess how and to what extent they have been represented in South Korea's museum spaces.

According to Suh Jae-Jung, the memory of the Korean War has been dominated by the "*Yu-gi-oh*" (6.25) narrative.[329] This hegemonic discourse has removed the war from its complex context and created an official myth. By referring to the war with the day of North Korea's invasion of South Korea on June 25 1950, the narrative has downplayed the underlying social and political causes of the conflict.[330]

The counter-hegemonic discourses that emerged with the democratic transition at the end of the 1980s, complicated the "*Yu-gi-oh"* narrative by providing a different and more complex understanding of the war. In particular, they identified the beginning of the conflict prior to the country's national division, and understood the war as an internal conflict, aggravated by the division and occupation by the rival powers amid the bipolar confrontation.[331]

They also pointed out the legacies of Japanese colonialism, as well as the role of the U.S. military government in enabling the former collaborators of the colonial regime to maintain their positions of power, thus laying the conditions for the subsequent military dictatorships.

As a consequence, the construction of South Korea as the victim of the unprovoked invasion from the "communists and their puppets" began to lose its legitimacy as alternative

---

[329] As part of a cultural and linguistic tradition, Koreans refer to historical events with the month and day on which they occurred to create an immediate collective memory and mark the significance of that specific event. Other examples besides 6.25 include the March 1st independence movement of 1919, which is referred to as "3.1" (*samil*), and the May 18 democratization movement of 1980, identified as "5.18" (*O-wol-sip-pa*l).

[330] Jae-Jung Suh, "Truth and reconciliation in South Korea: Confronting war, colonialism, and intervention in the Asia Pacific," Critical Asian Studies, 42, no. 4 (2010): 503-524.

[331] Ibid.

narratives called out the violence perpetrated by the South Korean state (and the United States) on its own citizens.[332]

It was within this context of competing narratives that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea (TRCK)-established in 2005- emerged as a key institutional response. According to Kim Dong-Choon, the establishment of the TRCK represented a crystallization of years of efforts to confront the injustices of the country's past, which had been systematically silenced by the regimes of Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-Hwan.[333] It built on previous struggles by governmental and civil society organizations dedicated to historical justice since the liberation from Japanese occupation on August 15, 1945.[334]

Following liberation, and with the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the first attempt to achieve transitional justice led to the adoption of the Special Act on Punishing Anti-National Activities of September 1948, which created the Special Investigation Committee (SIC).[335] This commission, instituted to investigate and punish the collaborators during Japanese colonialism, investigated 688 cases, prosecuted 293, tried 78, and arrested 19.[336]

President Rhee felt compelled to enact the Act and establish the SIC, but he had opposed it from the beginning, eventually dissolving it in 1951, and accusing its members of being communists threatening national security.[337] The commission failed because the new government mostly consisted of colonial elites who had maintained their power thanks to the protection of the U.S. military government.[338] Rhee refused to remove the identified collaborators from his administration, instead, those convicted were soon released, and some of those who had worked for the Japanese police intelligence service were recruited into the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), and into the G-2 army intelligence units.[339]

---

[332] Ibid., p. 507.

[333] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation: Unwavering Attempts to Achieve Justice in South Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 525-552.

[334] Ibid., p. 526.

[335] Ibid., p. 530.

[336] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error in Transitional Justice: Learning from South Korea's Truth Commissions." *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review* 19, no. 1 (2013): 125-167; Jetnor Kasmi, "Dealing with the past and the path to transitional justice: A comparative analysis of South Korea and Albania," *Asian Politics & Policy* 16, no. 1 (2024): 57-77.

[337] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 526.

[338] Ibid., p. 138.

[339] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", 139; Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 534.

The second attempt to uncover the omitted memories of the past, and particularly the state violence perpetrated during the Korean War, was during the brief pause from dictatorial rule, right before the military coup of 1961. The progressive weakening and eventual collapse of Rhee's regime following the students' uprising (April 19 Uprising), provided an opportunity to the families of the victims killed during the war to demand justice.[340]

They organized protests to request full investigations and established the National Association of the Bereaved Families of the Korean War Victims, which exhumed and properly buried the victims' remains in a newly built joint cemetery.[341] Among the association's requests to restore the honor of the victims was a demand to change the records of the family registry so that the victims would be identified as "innocent citizens" instead of "communist collaborators".[342] In response to these demonstrations, in May 1960, the National Assembly organized the Special Committee on Fact-finding of Massacres.[343]

However, the Special Committee launched by the ruling Liberal Party, which had supported Rhee's government, carried out the investigations only for eleven days, failing to produce any results.[344] In the meantime, Rhee fled to Hawaii following his resignation on April 26, 1960 and thus escaped accountability for the atrocities and human rights violations committed by his regime.[345]

The protests staged by the bereaved families and civil society activists were considered by the pro-Rhee and anticommunist elite as a resurgence of communist riots, calling for a stronger response, which took the form of the 1961 military coup.[346] Thus, this opportunity to open the way for transitional justice and reconciliation was soon cut short by the repressive regime led by General Park Chung-hee.[347]

---

[340] Dong-Choon, Kim, "The truth and reconciliation commission of Korea: uncovering the hidden Korean War," Asia-Pacific Journal 8, no. 9 (2010): 1-12; Byung-joon Jung, "Attempts to Settle the Past during the April Popular Struggle," *Korea journal* 42, no. 3 (2002): 87–111.

[341] Dong-Choon, Kim, "The truth and reconciliation commission of Korea", p. 2.

[342] Byung-joon Jung, "Attempts to Settle the Past", p. 106.

[343] Dong-Choon, Kim, "The truth and reconciliation commission of Korea", 2.; Andrew Wolman, "Looking back while moving forward: The evolution of Truth Commissions in Korea, " *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal 14,* no.3 (2012): 27-53.

[344] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 532; Andrew Wolman, "Looking back while moving forward", p. 34

[345] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 532.

[346] Ibid.

[347] Ibid.

Park arrested and prosecuted the leaders and activists of the families organizations and demolished the joint cemetery. This repression signaled that anyone requesting to find the truth on the deaths during the Korean War would be considered a communist, and thus a threat to the state.[348] Moreover, besides being severely discriminated against and marginalized from civil society and politics, the families were put under surveillance of the newly created Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA).[349] The KCIA enjoyed almost unlimited judicial power, allowing it to commit numerous human rights violations.[350]

Following the assassination of Park in 1979, General Chun Doo-hwan seized control of South Korea through another military coup and established a regime that continued to repress, arbitrarily arrest, and execute political opponents. During his regime, thousands of people were falsely accused of being North Korean spies.[351]

In May 1980, Chun orchestrated a brutal military crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in the city of Gwangju. For student activists, in particular, the issue of democratization became deeply tied with the uncovering of the truth regarding the Gwangju Massacre. Following the collapse of Chun's regime and the first direct and democratic presidential elections in December 1987, the newly elected president Roh Tae-woo established a presidential advisory commission to promote reconciliation as the democratic transition was ongoing.[352]

However, while recognizing the Gwangju uprising as a pro-democracy movement, the commission refused to impose any type of punishment to maintain democratic unity.[353] In response, in 1988, the National Assembly established a congressional commission on the Gwangju events and held several hearings on the massacre including Chun Doo-Hwan, marking the first time that a former president was questioned in a public hearing.[354] However, due to the congressional commission's lack of enforcement powers and little political will, the invoked suspects including former President Chun were not further prosecuted.[355]

---

[348] Dong-Choon, Kim, "The truth and reconciliation commission of Korea", 3; Byung-joon Jung, "Attempts to Settle the Past", p. 109.

[349] Dong-Choon, Kim, "The truth and reconciliation commission of Korea", p. 3.

[350] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 535.

[351] Ibid.

[352] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", p. 145.

[353] Ibid.

[354] Ibid.

[355] Ibid., p. 147.

Nevertheless, the hearings resulted in the establishment of the Law for Compensating the Victims of the Gwangju Incident of 1990.[356] Although the use of compensation did not include measures to achieve truth or justice, it was a first important step to consolidate the democratic transition. These laws marked the first legislation regulating governmental reparations to the victims of state violence. Kim Hun Joon notes that between 1990 and 1998 reparations were granted to almost 5,000 victims, amounting to 210 billion won (175 million USD).[357]

The families of the victims of state violence who had for so long been silenced and stigmatized were able to speak up again, although the recovery from their past traumas made them still cautious about rising demands for justice and truth.[358]

After being inaugurated as the first civilian president in thirty years, President Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) faced intense pressure from the public to investigate and punish the former military leaders.[359] Human rights lawyers and activists filed numerous lawsuits against Chun and Roh.[360] While having publicly condemned the conduct of his predecessors, President Kim believed that their prosecution would lead to social unrest.[361]

The prosecutorial office of the Seoul District established that the 1979 coup had constituted crimes of mutiny, insurrection and murder, and that the suppression of the Gwangju uprising involved crimes of murder and treason. However, the prosecutors concluded that they could not prosecute, because these charges fell out of the office's jurisdiction as they were political decisions.[362]

In 1995, the Korean Constitutional Court addressed this issue and refused to intervene in the prosecutorial decisions to avoid fomenting social conflicts.[363] The Korean public and students protested this decision. Due to increasing demands for justice, including more than 700,000 signatures for the institution of a special law to prosecute those responsible for the killings during

---

[356] Ibid., Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 537.

[357] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", p. 14.

[358] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 537.

[359] Kuk Cho, "Transitional justice in Korea: Legally coping with past wrongs after democratization," *Pac. Rim L. & Pol'y J.* 16 (2007): 579-611.

[360] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 537.

[361] Paul Hanley, "Transitional justice in South Korea: One country's restless search for truth and reconciliation," *East Asia Law Review* 9.2 (2014): 139-166.

[362] Ibid.; Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 537.

[363] Paul Hanley, "Transitional justice in South Korea", p. 149.

the Gwangju Massacre, President Kim was compelled to urge the ruling party to draft a new legislation.[364]

This resulted in the Special Act Regarding May 18 Democratization Movement that was passed in 1995 by the National Assembly.[365] In accordance with the new legislation, the Seoul District Prosecutor's Office launched criminal proceedings against Chun, Roh, and other high-ranking officials.[366] As a result, Chun was sentenced to life in prison on charges of treason and homicide, Roh was sentenced to 17 years in prison, and other 23 officials were sentenced for minor charges.[367] This was the first time that former presidents were incarcerated.

However, many citizens felt that this achievement lost its meaning when the former leaders were pardoned by Kim Young-sam on the advice of then-president elect Kim Dae-jung for the sake of national unity, and released from prison one year later.[368] Moreover, the commanders in charge of ordering the massacre, as well as soldiers and other government officials have never been punished.[369]

With the election of Kim Dae-jung in 1997, the first peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition party represented a turning point for transitional justice efforts. Another type of state violence that resurfaced is the death and disappearances of students, activists and politicians who had fought in pro-democracy movements under the military regimes.[370] This led to the establishment of the Presidential Truth Commission of Suspicious Deaths in Korea (2000-2004), which investigated 85 cases of suspicious deaths, 30 of which were determined to have been caused by the state.[371]

The 1990s were a crucial turning point also because the settlement of the Gwangju issue encouraged the families of the victims of state killings during the Korean War to finally speak up. This allowed for the uncovering of civilian mass killings committed by the ROK and U.S. forces

---

[364] Kuk Cho, "Transitional justice in Korea", p. 58.

[365] Paul Hanley, "Transitional justice in South Korea", p. 149; Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 538.

[366] Paul Hanley, "Transitional justice in South Korea", p. 150.

[367] Ibid.; Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 538.

[368] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", p. 147.

[369] Dong-Choon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation", p. 538; Paul Hanley, "Transitional justice in South Korea", p. 151.

[370] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", p. 149.

[371] Ibid.; Seuk-ryule Hong, "Finding the truth on the suspicious deaths under South Korea's military dictatorship," *Korea Journal* 42, no.3 (2002): 139-162.

through the establishment of the Special Committee for Recovering the Dignity of the Geochang Incident in 1996, and of the Jeju April 3 Commission in 2000.[372]

Most of the Jeju April 3 Commission recommendations were implemented, including measures to educate students and the public, establish a memorial park, and provide continued support for commemorative projects. Kim Hun Joon notes that after the release of the final report, the narratives in official documents and school textbooks changed to include the uncovered truth.[373]

Kim Dae-jung's successor, President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) made an official apology to the victims, families and population of Jeju for the past state violence, marking the first time that a head of government issued an apology and recognized the state's responsibility. In 2006 the president also participated in a memorial service on the island, where he issued another apology.[374]

Until 2004, conservatives used to control the majority of the National Assembly. However, the legislative elections held that year marked the first time a center-left liberal party, which was President Roh's Uri Party, secured a majority in the National Assembly. This favorable environment led to the Framework Act on Clearing Up Past Incidents for Truth and Reconciliation of 2005, which established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea (TRCK).[375]

Although the TRCK had limited power because it was created by a compromise between conservatives and progressives, it marked the culmination of the long struggle for justice. The TRCK was a government body independent of any ministries, composed of 15 members, 8 of which recommended by the National Assembly, 4 appointed by the president, and 3 by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.[376] The length of its mandate was two years with an extension of another two.

---

[372] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", p. 149.; On February 2, 1951, in Geochang, in the southern part of the country, 517 civilians, including children and the elderly, were killed by the South Korean Army through summary executions. They had the order of suppressing guerrilla activities within the range of the Chiri mountain. This mass killing is known as the Geochang civilian massacre. See Hye Yun Kang, 2022.

[373] Ibid.

[374] Ibid., p. 156.

[375] Ibid.

[376] Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea, *Truth and Reconciliation: Activities of the Past Three Years* (2009, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea)
https://www.jinsil.go.kr/en/nac/selectNoticeDetail.do?bbsId=BBSMSTR_000000000723&nttId=314514

Its scope was much more comprehensive than previous commissions. Its aim was to promote national legitimacy, national unity and reconciliation, by honoring those who took part in the liberation movements, and by uncovering the truth of the violence, massacres and human rights abuses that had taken place since the Japanese occupation.[377]

As stated in its 2009 report, the main areas of interests comprised the anti-Japanese movements, including those overseas; the massacres committed between August 15, 1945, and the Korean War; incidents between August 15 and the end of the military regimes, including injury, deaths, missing persons, human rights abuses, massacres and suspicious deaths; and other incidents deemed historically important by the commission.[378]

By 2010, the TRCK had investigated all cases, confirming 8,468 of them, and rejecting 1,729. The commission concluded that 75% of the total cases were related to civilian massacres that took place following liberation from the Japanese occupation until the Korean War.[379] It also found that 82% of the massacres were attributable to the state, while only 18% to the North Korean military and leftist groups.[380]

Besides investigating individual cases of human rights violations at the requests of the victims or by its own initiative, the commission also recommended policies of reconciliation to the relevant government branches. However, according to Kim Hun Joon, the implementation of the recommendations was less successful than that of the Jeju Commission.[381]

Since the TRCK investigated individual cases, recommendations were also made on an individual basis, 74% of which to the military and police as of 2010.[382] The apologies were issued mostly by local police chiefs and lower ranking military commanders, and the implemented recommendations largely required less effort and were considered less controversial, such as participating in memorial services.[383]

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission carried out a second mandate between December 2020 and December 2025. It closed 18,817 cases of the 20,000 truth-seeking

[377] Ibid.

[378] Ibid.

[379] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", p. 153.

[380] Ibid.

[381] Ibid., p. 159.

[382] Ibid.

[383] Ibid.

applications, confirming 11,913 and suspending 2,111.[384] The number of cases processed during this period amounted to almost double the volume of the 2005-2010 period. This time, the commission also investigated human rights violations in mass detention centers like Hyungje Bokjiwon and Seongam Academy and revealed the forced conscription of university students.[385]

Moreover, the final report addressed human rights violations related to overseas adoption between the 1950s and 1960s.[386] As part of its final recommendations, the TRCK called for the launch of a third commission to investigate the suspended cases. The latter was established in 2026 with a special focus on fraud and corruption related to overseas adoptions.[387]

## 3.2 Truth Commissions and Collective Memory

As argued in Chapter 1, truth commissions remain controversial instruments of transitional justice particularly with reference to their impact. While some scholars argue that they can prevent future violations and promote peace and democracy, others point out to the fact

---

[384] A-mo Koo, "Truth Commission Acknowledges State Responsibility in 20,000 Cases", *The Chosun Daily,* November 18, 2025, https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/11/18/PHPFRBXHXZEXPIQ2JH7H4FIZRE/

[385] Hyungje Bokjiwon (or Borthers Home) and Seongam Academy are examples of internment institutions developed within the context of South Korea's rapid modernization, following the end of the war. They were part of a government campaign to "clean" society of "undesirable" individuals and street "vagrants", which hid forced labor and human rights abuses, since they were also largely used to suppress dissent. Brothers Home, located in Busan, represented the biggest of these institutions, as it is estimated that between 1975 and 1987, around 40,000 people, including children (sometimes even newborns), the elderly, the disabled, and senile people were interned there. It started as a small foundation housing around 60 orphaned children in the 1960s, but later developed into a "welfare facility", which in reality resembled more a labor or concentration camp. These incarcerated individuals were exploited to work in the Brothers Home's factories (around 20) in the production of goods that were later exported abroad. Seongam Academy was an orphanage/internment camp founded on an island near Ansan in 1942 during the Japanese occupation, and which continued its activities until 1982. The estimated 4691 detained individuals conducted similar work to those in Brothers Home and suffered human rights abuses, including torture, malnutrition, rape, and drowning. According to Elin Park Sorensen, it is possible that such institutions were part of a wider child trafficking network, which sometimes even led to cases of international adoption, a phenomenon that reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. See Elin Park Sorensen, 2023.

[386] Ibid.

[387] Tong-hyung Kim, "South Korea Relaunches Truth Commission with Focus on Adoption Fraud", *Frontline*, February 26, 2026, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/south-korea-truth-commission-adoption-fraud/

that truth commissions also risk exacerbating existing cleavages, by reinforcing identities of victimhood, and by provoking former perpetrators who are still holding power.[388]

According to Suh, the necessity to institutionalize the efforts to redress the country's past within the state poses a dilemma to transitional justice, namely having to shift the strategy from challenging the narratives imposed by the state, to having to work with it.[389] While creating a stable structure is necessary to better address these issues, there is also the danger of de-politicizing the struggle, by imposing a certain truth, and thus closing the political debate.

Kim Hun Joon notes that there are various ways in which to assess the impact, success, or failure of truth commissions.[390] These include comparing the situation before and after the establishment of the commission to identify improvements in justice, peace, democracy, and human rights. Some scholars have focused on assessing the implementation of the commission's recommendations, while others have instead focused on the achievement of goals centered on the victims, including psychological healing, and the right to know. [391]

Truth commission activities can challenge, revise, and strengthen collective memory and public education.[392] In particular, truth commissions can create a new shared history, provide insights to learn from the past, and can contribute to the development of a human rights' culture where citizens value human rights.[393] While the commissions' activities can correct misperceptions of the past, the new uncovered truths can become new sources of debate. This is because collective memory is constantly constructed and re-reshaped.

For example, when former conservative President Lee Myung-bak was elected in 2008, he immediately criticized the TRCK and hindered its work by cutting its budget, and by appointing a new president and commissioners who viewed the activities of the past commission less positively.[394] During Lee's term, public officials became less cooperative with the TRCK's investigation requests.[395]

Moreover, the impact of the New Right's revisionism on the redress movement can be seen in Lee's successor's attempt to reform textbooks. Conservative President Park Geun-hye and

---

[388] Hun Joon Kim, "Truth commissions and collective memory in South Korea: achievements and challenges," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (2025): 1-12.

[389] Jae-Jung Suh, "Truth and reconciliation in South Korea, p. 513.

[390] Hun Joon Kim, "Truth commissions and collective memory", p. 3.

[391] Ibid.

[392] Ibid.

[393] Ibid., p. 5.

[394] Hun Joon Kim, "Trial and Error", p. 161.

[395] Ibid.

her supporters viewed mainstream textbooks as left-leaning, therefore, her administration introduced a controversial policy in 2015 to mandate state-authored history textbooks for all middle and high schools.[396]

In the case of South Korea, the TRCK impacted collective memory and public education by exposing the massacres committed during the Korean War, not only by the North Korean and communist guerrilla fighters, but also by the South Korean state, and U.S. military.[397] This challenged the hegemonic anti-communist narrative of the regimes of Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-Hwan. Other commissions also revealed systematic state violence, including torture, forced disappearance and killings during the military dictatorships.[398]

Following Kim Hun Joon's approach, this chapter focuses on how truth commissions can shape collective memory and public education.[399] In particular, through the analysis of museum exhibitions, the next sections examine the extent to which the narrative changes and the recommendations introduced by the process of transitional justice, and in particular by the establishment of the Jeju Commission and of the TRCK, are reflected in the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History and in the War Memorial of Korea.

## 3.3 Methodology

The analysis of the museum exhibitions is based on fieldwork carried out between September and December 2025. The author visited the War Memorial of Korea twice, first in September, and again in December, and visited the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History in October. The data was collected through direct observation, focusing on the exhibitions' content, as well as the surrounding environment, and the organization and spatial disposition of the exhibits.

The analysis focuses on four main themes: the period between liberation from Japanese colonialism and the establishment of the Republic of Korea; the beginning of the Korean War and its causes; the UN intervention; and the signing of the armistice.[400] The analysis also considers how the exhibitions cover the decades of military regimes, and the democratic transition, as the

[396] Sungik Yang, "An Old Right in New Bottles", p. 904.

[397] Hun Joon Kim, "Truth commissions and collective memory", pp. 1-12.

[398] Ibid., p.7.

[399] Ibid, p. 3.

[400] The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History features the Korean War within Part 2 of its permanent History Gallery, titled "From 1945 to 1987: For Peace, Democracy and Prosperity". In the War Memorial of Korea, the Korean War is featured in the part titled "Korea War I, II, and III".

uncovered memories related to these historical periods have also been central to the redress movements.

The collected material includes photographs of exhibition panels and objects, as well as transcriptions and translations of panel texts.[401] Critical Discourse Analysis is applied on this material, focusing in particular on the choice of words, implicit meanings, the use of colors, titles and lighting, as well as selection and omission of historical facts. Particular attention is paid to the discursive construction of national identity, state legitimacy, and the representation of North Korea, as well as the United States, China and the Soviet Union.

To complement the fieldwork and compensate for possible observation gaps, the author's analysis is integrated with the scholarship on these museums including the works of Do Myoun-Hoi, Sheila Miyoshi Jager, Hong Kal, Kim Daniel Y., Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Guy Podoler, Kenneth, J. Ruoff, and Patrick Vierthaler. These studies are used to provide a contextual analysis of the museums' exhibitions, to account for diverse interpretations, and to verify the latest changes in the expositions. Moreover, the author consulted news articles and the museums' websites to include the latest developments, including renovations and controversies.

## 3.4 The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History

The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (NMKCH) is funded and managed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, and compared to other institutions, it has received exceptional support.[402] As Do Myoun-hoi points out, because of the financial support that comes from the state, the NMKCH is a "national institution" and thus it can be used as a means of promotion of the state authority.[403]

Furthermore, Podoler characterizes the museum as a "knowledge-based socio-political institution" that represents hegemonic national values and myths, therefore, it can influence people's understanding and values, impacting the construction of collective memory and national identity.[404]

---

[401] For the translation of panel descriptions available only in Korean, the author used the automatic AI translation service Naver Papago, and independently verified the accuracy of the translation.

[402] Ibid.,p. 93; Kenneth J. Ruoff, "How Museums in the Republic of Korea Narrate National History," *The Journal of Northeast Asian History* 14.2 (2017): 119-188.

[403] Myoun-hoi Do, "Ten Years of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History From a Historian's Perspective", Public History & Museum 5 (2022): 90-104.

[404] Guy Podoler, "The past under the shadow of the present: The case of the national museum of Korean contemporary history," *Asian Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (2017): 424-440.

Do describes the NMKCH as a "museum of history" where the results of historical research are presented to its visitors through the display of historical items and facts. According to the author, there are three types of museums of history. The first type presents history according to state-designed textbooks, portraying a one-sided ideological representation.

The second type focuses on the history of people's everyday life, thus avoiding a unilateral narrative. The third type refers to museums that can also organize their exhibits focusing on the political history of the nation, while at the same time including cultural and everyday recounts.[405] The NMKCH currently falls between the second and third types. However, when it was first opened, its permanent exhibitions corresponded to the first category.[406]

The museum opened on December 26, 2012. The project of its construction was announced by then-conservative President Lee Myung-bak in 2008 during his speech on Liberation Day (August 15).[407] Lee argued that the creation of the museum was necessary to record South Korea's troubled history of development in the midst of suffering and hardship, and to enhance citizens' pride in the country's success.[408]

Since its opening, the NMKCH has been a contested "site of memory" being at the center of debates between the conservatives and the liberals over the "correct" way to represent national history.[409] These controversies reflect South Korea's memory politics following the democratic transition and efforts towards transitional justice, as well as the contested nature of its national identity and collective memory.

Criticism from academia, historians, civil society, and politicians argued that the contents of the permanent exhibitions were imbalanced, as they highlighted the history of South Korea's economic growth over democratization, downplaying citizens' sacrifices and tragedies connected to those events.[410] According to Do, the organization of the exhibitions at that time, reflected the New Right's narrative that prioritized the state over the nation, highlighting the country's national identity based on the free market economy and liberal democracy with the result that fractures within social and political circles were accentuated.[411]

---

[405] Myoun-hoi Do, "Ten Years of the National Museum", p. 92.

[406] Ibid.

[407] Kenneth, J. Ruoff, "How Museums in the Republic of Korea Narrate National History," p. 128.

[408] Myoun-hoi Do, "Ten Years of the National Museum", p. 92.

[409] Guy Podoler, "The past under the shadow of the present", p. 425

[410] Ibid., p. 430; Myoun-hoi Do, "Ten Years of the National Museum", p. 94.

[411] Myoun-hoi Do, "Ten Years of the National Museum", p. 94.

For instance, the opposition pointed out that materials on Park's modernization policy of the rural areas exceeded those covering the pro-democracy movements.[412] According to Patrick Vierthaler, the criticism mostly addressed the structure of the museum's linear narrative, divided into four sections. In particular, the establishment of the ROK's government in 1948 was represented as the moment marking the beginning of South Korea's history, together with two other turning points, namely Park Chung-hee's 1961 military coup, and the 1987 June Democracy Movement.[413]

This timeline, together with the downplay of the guerrilla resistance led by Kim Il-sung and other Koreans of Northern descent, reflected the framing of the Republic of Korea as the only legitimate government of the Peninsula.[414] The structure of the 2012 permanent exhibition revealed the influence of the New Right state-centered identity narrative as it downplayed the 1919 March 1 Movement, the liberation, the 1960 April Revolution, and the 1980 Gwangju Massacre.[415]

Considering these protests, when the progressives regained power in 2017 with the election of Moon Jae-in, the museum's permanent galleries underwent renovations. While the linear and gradual narrative of ascent from poverty and war to economic development and democracy was preserved, it now focused more on the modern nation state.[416] The new chronology replaced the establishment of the ROK government in 1948 with the 1945 liberation and division as the new turning points and removed the emphasis on the events of 1961.[417]

Furthermore, the exhibitions were changed to focus more on the pro-democracy movement and the workers' sacrifices amid industrialization.[418] The NMKCH was restructured into the current state, which includes the permanent History Gallery on the fifth floor, which was renovated in 2019 and 2020, the Interactive Gallery on the fourth floor, and the Thematic Gallery on the third, installed in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The exhibitions are currently divided into three periods titled "Part 1: from 1894 to 1945 Longing for Freedom, Equality, and

---

[412] Ibid.

[413] Patrick Vierthaler, "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History: A Contested Site of Cultural Memory," *European Journal of Korean Studies* 23 (2024): 117-146.

[414] Kenneth J. Ruoff, "How Museums in the Republic of Korea Narrate National History," p. 136.

[415] Patrick Vierthaler, "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History", p. 123.

[416] Ibid.

[417] Ibid.

[418] Myoun-hoi Do, "Ten Years of the National Museum", p. 95.

Independence", "Part 2: From 1945 to 1987 For Peace, Democracy, and Prosperity", and "Part 3: 1987 to the present Me-The Republic of Korea-The World".[419]

Therefore, the narratives of the museum's exhibition shifted from a focus on statism and the New Right's modernization theory to a more complete recount of people's ordinary lives.[420] As expected, the restructuring of the museum was criticized by the conservatives for being ideological and left leaning. For instance, they accused the NMKCH of downplaying the North's invasion, while overstating the brutality of the South Korean army, and for depicting the Korean War as a civil war.[421]

In August 2022, under the conservative administration of President Yoon Suk-yeol, the museum underwent a second restructuring. According to a press release of the Ministry of Culture, the permanent exhibition of the museum had been criticized by the National Assembly, the media and the visitors for presenting the facts in an imbalanced way, risking to cause controversies and distortions of the facts.[422]

The press release argued that the first page of the Liberation Daily of July 10, 1950, which identified the cause of the war with the invasion of North Korea, was displayed without sufficient explanation of the context. According to the press release, visitors had reported that the display lacked objectivity.[423]

On January 3, 2023, a second press release announced the change of the overarching theme of the permanent history gallery from "Independence and Division" to "Independence and the Establishment of the ROK Government".[424]Accordingly, the new title reflected the museum's emphasis on the "vigorous strides" of the ROK Government after the suffering of national division.[425] This marked a narrative change away from the progressives' ethno-nationalist, partially reversing the changes implemented during the first round of renovations under former President Moon.

---

[419] Ibid.

[420] Ibid., p. 99.

[421] Ibid.

[422] Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Reorganizes The Korean War Exhibition Sections", press release, August 9, 2022, https://www.mcst.go.kr/english/policy/pressView.jsp?pSeq=142

[423] Ibid.

[424] Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Renews Its Permanent Exhibition from 'Independence and Division' to 'Independence and the Establishment of the ROK Government'", press release, January 3, 2023, https://www.mcst.go.kr/english/policy/pressView.jsp?pSeq=209

[425] Ibid.

### 3.4.1 The NMKCH Narratives of the Korean War

At the NMKCH, national division and the Korean War are recounted within Part 2 of its permanent History Gallery space titled "From 1945 to 1987 For Peace, Democracy, and Prosperity". The exposition begins by addressing Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule on August 15, 1945. It explains how the independence of the Peninsula was interrupted by the agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union to divide the country along the 38th parallel, which was formalized around Japan's formal surrender on September 2, 1945.

The exhibit highlights the fact that Koreans' efforts to create a unified government failed due to "disagreements between the left and right" in the context of the "turbulent realignment of the global political order". A panel reads that despite the intention of the United States Army Military Government (USAMGIK) of "creating an economic and social infrastructure", its "ill-informed decisions and policies frustrated its efforts to calm social unrest and turmoil". This description downplays the depth of social and political tensions that spread within South Korea following the liberation.

By reducing them to ideological "disagreements", this narrative marginalizes their roots in the legacy of the Japanese political, economic, and bureaucratic system, which was strengthened by the policies of the USAMGIK. Furthermore, no mention of the anti-communist nature of the U.S. intervention was made. This discourse seems to reflect the New Right's revisionism.

The exhibition continues with the events related to the U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission, which was in charge of finding a compromise on the creation of a unified government. In particular, the panels highlight the fact that any decision had to be taken in consultation with the democratic parties and social organizations of "Joseon". Another panel also mentions the April 21, 1948, proposal by Kim Kyu-sik, who was a key nationalist political figure alongside Rhee Syngman, to Kim Il-sung on the five conditions for Inter-Korean negotiations.[426]

These recounts might suggest an intention to emphasize Koreans' struggles to create a united free, democratic and independent state. However, as Vierthaler points out, the exhibition omits the visit of prominent right-nationalist Kim Ku's visit to the North in April 1948, which was instead displayed in the 2020 exhibition, alongside a picture of Kim Ku's meeting with Kim Il-sung, which was removed following the most recent renovations.[427] Furthermore, in the current

[426] Kim Kyu-sik was the Vice President of the Provisional Government from 1940 to 1947.

[427] Patrick Vierthaler, "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History", p. 136.; In November 1945, Kim Ku, who had led the Korean Restoration Army and Provisional Government in China, returned to Korea. See Kyung M. Hwang, 2010.

exhibition, while Rhee Syngman is notably featured in sections related to liberation and the establishment of the ROK, the role of Kim Ku is downplayed.[428]

This narrative omits the alternative possibility of a unified government to the May 10 Constitutional Assembly elections. The latter are described as the "formal establishment of the Korean government on August 15, 1948" and shown in a video in English and Korean as the "right decisions", paving the way for the country's economic development.[429]

Furthermore, when covering the 1948 Jeju Uprising, the current exposition does not situate it within the context of social and political opposition to the elections. Instead, the exhibits, titled "Jeju 4.3 Incident", recount that the "angry Jeju residents" protested on March 1, 1947 in a backlash following the killing of six people by the police during a demonstration commemorating the March 1 independence Movement on Jeju Island.

The panels recount that the USAMGIK responded strongly, worsening the situation, and that on April 3 1948, the Namrodang Jeju Provincial Party raised an armed uprising. The exhibit continues by stating that as a result of this, numerous Jeju residents were "sacrificed" during the military and police crackdown. This narrative marginalizes the responsibility of the South Korean state in the mass killings of civilians, as the wording used remains vague, without any reference to the estimated number of people killed. This considerably contrasts with the 2020 exposition, which displayed a map of Jeju illustrating the number of victims by township, now removed.[430]

Moreover, the use of the word "sacrificed", and the emphasis on the armed nature of the uprising seems to downplay the responsibility of the South Korean government, also considering that no explicit mention to the South Korean military and police is made. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the panels are written only in Korean, precluding most foreign visitors full access to these controversial events.

The museum's exhibition seems to reflect the "*Yu-gi-oh*" narrative of the Korean War. It refers to the conflict as "6.25" and situates it within the context of the Cold War, attributing the responsibility of its outbreak to the North's invasion, with the support of the USSR and China. In particular, the panels recount that after the end of WWII, the Korean Peninsula and Germany were divided as a consequence of the bipolar confrontation. The exhibit also mentions other conflicts that erupted globally in this period, namely, in Iran and Greece, "with the assistance of the U.S. and the Soviet Union".

[428] Ibid., p. 141.

[429] Ibid., p. 134.

[430] Ibid., p. 136.

Therefore, the exhibition emphasizes that the creation of the two U.S.- and USSR-led blocks did not only affect the Korean Peninsula, but also Europe, adding a global perspective to the exhibition. This is also done through a timeline of the key events that led to the outbreak of the Korean War between 1945 and 1950, as can be seen in Figure 1, 2 and 3.

In particular, the selection of events between 1949 and 1950 contributes to portraying South Korea as a victim caught up in the bipolar confrontation. By situating the beginning of the Korean War within a broader global context, the narrative of victimhood gains more legitimacy. Vierthaler notes how the use of various hashtags to summarize the main events, as shown in Figure 3, reflects an orthodox understanding of the Cold War.[431]

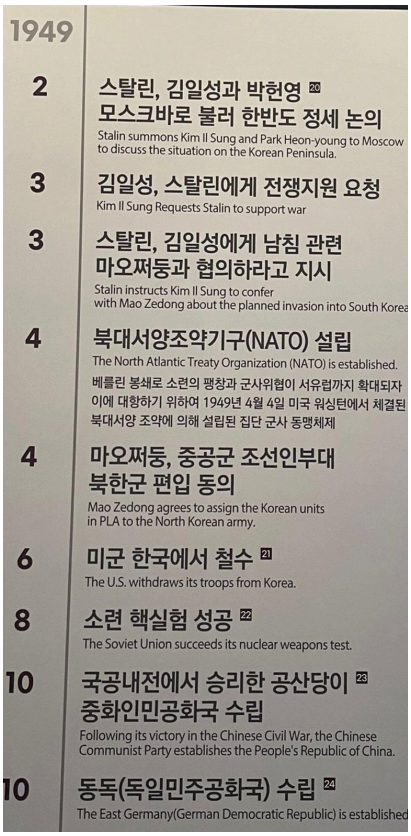


**Figure 1.** Timeline of key events in 1949. Picture taken by the author at the NMKCH.

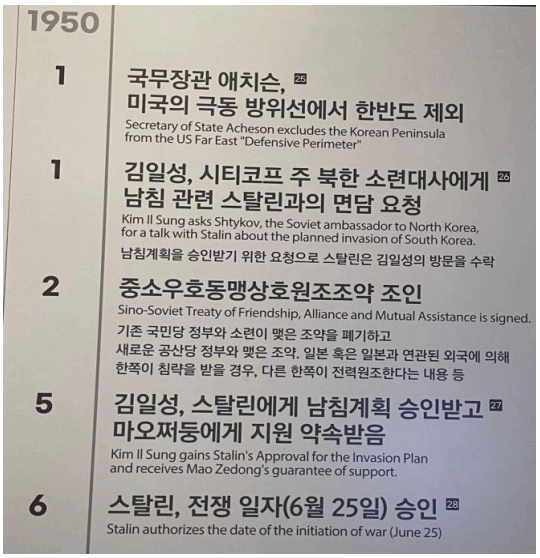


**Figure 2.** Timeline of key events in 1950. Picture taken by the author at the NMKCH.

[431] Ibid.

**Figure 3.** Panel summarizing the main events from 1945 to 1950 using various hashtags. Picture taken by the author at the NMKCH.

The timeline in Figure 1 and Figure 2 highlights the progression of threatening developments by North Korea, the Soviet Union and China, while showing South Korea's vulnerable position, exacerbated by the decreased military presence of the United States. The "*Yu-gi-oh*" narrative is emphasized by framing the war as the result of Stalin-authorized "planned invasion" of the North of June 25.

Furthermore, Figure 4, which shows the unbalanced military capabilities of the two Koreas, with the South being in a disadvantageous position, also contributes to the creation of a victimhood identity. The map of the Korean Peninsula is divided vertically into two parts, a blue-colored one grouping the military figures relating to the South Korean troops, and a red-colored one containing the figures of the North. The panel illustrates the number of soldiers and warfare of the army, the navy and the air force at the beginning of the war, highlighting that the North Korean army had 242 tanks, 115 vessels, and 226 aircrafts with a total of 188,297 soldiers, while the South had zero tanks, a fleet of 36 vessels, 22 aircrafts, and 94,974 soldiers.

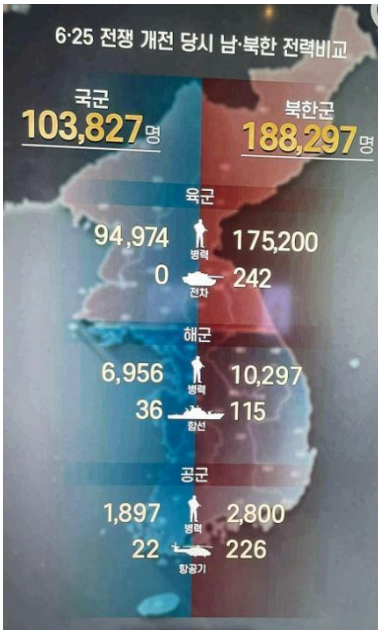


**Figure 4.** An illustration of the military capabilities of the North and South at the outbreak of the war. Picture taken by the author at the NMKCH.

The exhibition continues with the description of the United Nations' intervention, emphasizing the fact that the Korean War was the first major military enforcement action and collective security operation carried out by United Nations forces. The exhibits report the participation of 16 countries that sent troops, 6 that provided medical support, and 39 that sent supplies and financial assistance. The panels frame this intervention as the United Nations' "first collective security action to protect international peace and security".

Although it uses milder terms that do not emphasize the ideological confrontation (as the frame of a war against communism would have done), this frame aligns with Rhee Syngman's narrative of the Korean War as a conflict affecting not only Korea but the freedom and peace of the whole world, including the United States. Other panels commemorate the participation of the UN armed forces, by displaying pictures of soldiers and nurses in action, and various artifacts, including the member countries' postage stamps, and a 1951 poster of the Turkish army.

The exhibition concludes with the 1953 armistice, and the signing of the Korea-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty in October 1953. The exhibits highlight how the armistice talks were dragged on over the issue of the exchange of prisoners of war, and the initial South Korean negotiators' refusal to join the talks.

As explained in the museum, and in line with the literature, the History Gallery of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History aims to provide a panoramic overview of South Korea's contemporary history, from the founding of the nation to the building of the

modern state. While the second part of the exhibition titled "For Peace, Democracy and Prosperity" partially includes unearthed memories like the Jeju uprising–although without specifically calling out the state's responsibility in the civilian mass killings–the museum still largely portrays the hegemonic "*Yu-gi-oh*" narrative of the war, by identifying the cause of the conflict with the North's planned invasion, highlighting South Korea's victimhood identity.

According to Nam Hee-sook, former Director of the Museum, the exhibitions aim to provide an "objective fact-based understanding of the history of Korea's development through its miraculous economic growth and democratization movements".[432] However, the active memory displayed in national museums is always functional, as it serves to provide legitimacy to a specific political camp or organization.[433] Facts that are more controversial, like the number of civilians killed during the Jeju uprising are omitted, while less contested facts are recounted in more detail.

The analysis shows how museums can reflect contested collective memories. As Vierthaler points out, the NMKCH's history is a physical demonstration of the mnemonic contestation between South Korea's conservative and progressive wings.[434] Moreover, questions can be raised about the future of the museum following the change of government in 2025 that brought the liberals back to power.

Since the election of Lee Jae-myung, renovations have been limited to improvements of the physical infrastructure of the museum, including renovations of its garden rooftop, and the opening of the Seosadam Contemporary History Library and Archive on the first floor.[435] Rather than changing the permanent gallery, it seems that the museum's current administration has been focusing on temporary and less controversial exhibitions. These include for instance a special exhibition commemorating the 80th anniversary of Korea's liberation titled "Taegeukgi: The Days We've Shared Together" that was hosted between August and November 2025.[436]

---

[432] Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Renews Its Permanent Exhibition".

[433] Patrick Vierthaler, "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History", p. 119.

[434] Ibid.

[435] National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, "Taegeukgi: The Days We've Shared Together," *MUCH Webzine*, n. 77(2025), https://www.much.go.kr/resource/newsletter/vol.77/index.html

[436] National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, "Enjoying Rest and Contemplation: New Landscapes at the Museum," *MUCH Webzine*, n. 77(2025), https://www.much.go.kr/resource/newsletter/vol.77/index.html

## 3.5 The War Memorial of Korea: Tensions between Ethnic Nationalism and Anti-Communism

Memorial museums and monuments are institutions delivering narratives of the nation's recent history and formulating the notions of nation and citizenship. Fragments of the past are collected, assembled and re-contextualized into a present narrative for the construction of national identity.[437] The representation of war and death is at the center of the nation's identity, and their memories are essential to ensure the immortality of the nation.[438]

The War Memorial of Korea (WMK) is a national institution run by the government-affiliated Korea War Memorial Organization. It was established in 1989 under the government of Roh Tae-woo, and opened to the public in 1994, not long after the election of Kim Young-sam.[439] Like the NMKCH, the memorial has been controversial since its opening. At the beginning, intellectuals and students considered it to be a representation of the persistence of authoritarian power celebrating an enforced patriotic history.[440]

The contested nature of memorial museums and monuments has to do with their dual role of educating the citizens about the country's history, and commemorating the soldiers who sacrificed themselves in the defense of the nation.[441] Tessa Morris-Suzuki argues that, on one level, memorials are personal spaces for the relatives of the dead to mourn their loved ones, and thus do not need to be impartial or provide the complete story of the conflict.[442]

On the other hand, as museums, they are public places conveying the record of the war to younger generations who have not directly experienced it. This dual role, however, poses a dilemma as to how to provide a balanced history.[443] As Hong Kal points out, uncomfortable questions are raised, namely, how to address the forefathers' wrongdoings when they sacrificed themselves for the nation, or how to portray a plural war history when this should reaffirm the

---

[437] Hong Kal, "Commemoration and the Construction of Nationalism: War Memorial Museums in Korea and Japan," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 6, no. 9 (2008): 38-67.

[438] Ibid., p. 39.

[439] Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Monumental histories: Manliness, the military, and the war memorial," *Public Culture* 14.2 (2002): 387-409.

[440] Ibid., p. 393.

[441] Daniel Y. Kim, "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory and the Korean War: Militarism and Neo-Liberalism in The Price of Freedom and the War Memorial of Korea," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 4, no. 1 (2015): 40-70.

[442] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Remembering the Unfinished Conflict: Museums and the Contested Memory of the Korean War," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 7, no.29 (2009): 1-24.

[443] Ibid., p. 20.

national identity.[444] These questions are particularly relevant in the case of South Korea, given the highly contested nature of its past.

The memorial was conceived in the late and post-Cold War setting, under President Roh, who at the time was pursuing his Nordpolitik through which his administration sought to normalize diplomatic and economic relations with North Korea's traditional patrons, specifically the Soviet Union and China. Therefore, the establishment of the memorial came with the need of conciliating the tasks for commemoration and reconciliation both at the domestic level, and in inter-Korean relations.[445]

According to Daniel Kim, before the 2013 renovations of the rooms dedicated to the Korean War, the exhibitions minimized the anti-North Korean and anti-communist rhetoric.[446] However, following the renovations, the tension between commemoration and reconciliation became more strongly manifested in the overall narrative of the memorial.

On the one hand, the WMK largely reflects the "*Yu-gi-oh*" understanding of the war, portraying South Korea as the victim of the planned invasion by the North. Through this narrative, the South Korean state bases its legitimacy on anti-communism. On the other hand, the memorial constructs an ethnic Korean identity by celebrating all of its war heroes from the period of the Three Kingdoms (57 B.C.-A.D. 668) and even earlier, tracing their origins to a single lineage covering 5000 years.[447]

Within this lineage, the South Korean state is framed as the only legitimate representative of the Korean nation. Accordingly, North Korea is framed as the most closely ethnically related Other, with which South Korea must eventually reunite. However, this reunification is to be achieved through absorption by the South.[448]

Despite the fact that the nationalist anti-communist narrative has partly lost its legitimacy following the rise of counter-hegemonic discourses with the process of democratization, the

---

[444] Hong Kal, "Commemoration and the Construction of Nationalism", p. 39.

[445] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Remembering the Unfinished Conflict", p. 4.

[446] Daniel Y. Kim, "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory", p. 59.

[447] Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Monumental histories", p. 393.

[448] Hong Kal, "Commemoration and the Construction of Nationalism", p. 53.; In the Unification White Paper released in 2026 by the current Lee Jae-myung's administration, North and South are considered as "de facto" two separate states. Accordingly, South Korea's North Korea policy focuses on peaceful coexistence and shared growth, oriented towards unification, and follows three main principles: recognition and respect of the North's political system; renunciation of unification by absorption, and refrain from hostile acts. However, this policy was contested by some who argue that it violates article 3 of the constitution which defines the Korean Peninsula as the country's territory. Lee's policy diverges from the more confrontational approach of former president Yoon Suk-yeol. See Yoo Joo-hee, 2026.

underlying anti-communist rhetoric remains visible in the WMK. For instance, this narrative is symbolized by the "Statue of Brothers" (Figure 5), located on one corner of the exterior exhibit area of the memorial. The statue was conceived after the plans for the War Memorial were approved and depicts two brothers from the opposite sides of the Korean War embracing on the battlefield.[449]

The elder and more muscular brother represents South Korea, the legitimate heir of the nation, while the younger and weaker brother symbolizes North Korea.[450] The emotional expression on the South Korean soldier's face, and the non-threatening position of his weapon, pointing away from the younger brother, contribute to portraying the older brother as forgiving.[451]

At the same time, the fact that the South Korean soldier carries a weapon, while the North Korean is unarmed, sends the message that South Korea is always prepared for war, if provoked.[452] According to Kal, the portrayal of the North Korean soldier as defenseless represents the victory of South Korean democracy over communism. The family hierarchy portrayed by the statue symbolizes the coexistence of the narratives of ethnic brotherhood and that of anti-communism.[453]

Walking towards the center of the memorial's central plaza, the second sculpture that visitors encounter is the Korean War Monument (Figure 6), completed in 2003 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Korean War. At its center there is a tower, resembling an artillery shell, vertically split into two.[454] According to the memorial's website, this structure depicts "a bronze dagger that symbolizes the long history and militaristic spirit and the three of life, peace and prosperity of the Korean people"[455] At the sides, the stone figures of 38 "Patriotic Heroes" represent the "spirit of sacrifice and patriotism of the martyrs". They are surrounded by a stone wall symbolizing the Korean Peninsula. A stone bowl placed at the bottom of the statue "embodies the lustral water to express people's aspirations for prosperity, peace, and national reunification".[456]

---

[449] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Remembering the Unfinished Conflict", p. 5.

[450] Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "Monumental histories", p. 406.

[451] Ibid.

[452] Ibid.

[453] Ibid.

[454] Daniel Y. Kim, "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory", pp. 55-56.

[455] "The Korean War Monument", *Korea War Memorial Organization*, accessed September 6, 2026, https://www.warmemo.or.kr:8443/Eng/E20000/E20100/E20110/html

[456] Ibid.

**Figure 5.** The Statue of Brothers. Source: Wikipedia

**Figure 6.** The Korean War Monument. Source: Korean War Memorial Organization Website

As Kal points out, the spatial organization of the memorial grounds creates a temporal sequence that solemnly guides visitors inside the building.[457] After crossing the central plaza, surrounded by the flags of the participating UN member states, and climbing the stairs to the entrance, the visitor is led directly into the second floor, where the Central Hall and Memorial Hall are located. The Central Hall leads to a corridor, which, on both sides, hosts the busts of heroic warriors.

Crossing the corridor and passing through the Hall of Heroes, the visitor reaches the dimly lit Memorial Hall, which recalls an ancestral shrine.[458] At its center there is a bowl, similar to an ancestral altar where visitors can contemplate the war dead, and into which a light is projected from a fissure into the dome ceiling. According to Hong, "the bowl and the light are where the spirit of the war dead meets the living".[459] Therefore, the path from the exterior to the interior can be described as "a journey back to the 'origin'".[460]

[457] Hong Kal, "Commemoration and the Construction of Nationalism", p. 41.

[458] Ibid., p. 42.

[459] Ibid.

[460] Ibid.

### 3.5.1 The WMK Narratives of the Korean War

Since the Korean War is framed into a larger narrative of the central role of war and of the South Korean military in the construction of national identity, it takes up most of the museum's exhibition space.[461] The exhibition is divided into three rooms, the "Korean War I" and the "Korean War II" on the second floor, and the "Korean War III" on the third. The period following the signing of the armistice agreement, including the military regimes and the transition to democracy is not displayed in the memorial.

After entering the first room, titled: "Invasion of the South and Counter Attack", like in the NMKCH, the exhibition of the WMK begins with the background of the war, starting from liberation from Japanese occupation. However, the story is narrated differently. The exhibits recount how the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and the Soviet Union started to advance towards the Korean Peninsula, after having declared war against Japan on August 8.

According to the exhibit, the Independence Army of the provisional government of Korea was ready to enter the country but could not achieve independence due to Japan's sooner than expected surrender. This frame emphasizes that Korea's independence was impeded by external factors and did not depend on the readiness of the Korean army.

Moreover, national division is framed as the result of the U.S.-proposed 38th parallel demarcation line to prevent the USSR from occupying the entire Peninsula. This rhetoric portrays Korea as the victim, and minimizes the responsibility of the United States, highlighting the fault of the Soviet Union. This is further emphasized by the description of the demarcation line as "a line of intense confrontation between democracy and communism".

Furthermore, the exhibit states that two military governments were established on both sides of the Peninsula, although it was only the U.S. that ruled through a military government. The responsibility of the USSR for the national division is further emphasized by illustrating how the Soviet Union opposed the UN proposed elections, by denying access to the UN Temporary Commission to North Korea. The exhibit highlights that, as a result, two different states were established, and that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea received "full support from the Soviet Union".

Concerning the description of the domestic context before the outbreak of the war, the exhibits argue that, while "Rhee Syngman promoted democratic principles with the support of the

[461] Daniel Y. Kim, "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory", p. 41.

United States of America, North Korea's Kim Il-sung prepared for war with the support of the Soviet Union and Communist China."

Furthermore, according to the exhibits, "South Korea saw several riots and revolts led by left-wing political groups", some of which caused the loss of a lot of lives, including South Korean soldiers and innocent civilians. The exhibit continues by emphasizing the role of "North Korean partisans" engaging in "guerrilla warfare" at Jirisan mountain, resulting in the "weakening of South Korean border defenses", since the government had to "relocate a significant number of troops at the border to other parts of her territory in order to pacify conflicts".

This frame omits the competition between the different political sides, and the atrocities and mass killings committed by the Rhee's repressive anti-communist regime, with the support of the United States. Moreover, this narrative also serves to implicitly justify the failure to prevent the North's invasion.

Therefore, like the NMKCH, by blaming North Korea, China, the Soviet Union and the leftist political groups for starting the conflict, the War Memorial reflects the "*Yu-gi-oh*" narrative. The organization of the displays in the exhibition emphasizes the anti-communist rhetoric and creates an alarming and urgent atmosphere. In the dimly lit room, on a big panel on the wall, a red frame of the Korean Peninsula illustrates the advance of the North Korean troops after launching an all-out offensive, while a description on a red background describes the "invasion planning" between Kim Il-Sung, Stalin and Mao.

Several vehicles and weapons are also displayed, belonging to both sides of the war, to illustrate the imbalance of military capabilities. Like in the WMKCH, although more explicitly, the war memorial frames the attack by the North as a surprise invasion that took South Korea unprepared. The war is described as a conflict "between the prepared and the unprepared".

There are various illustrations and descriptions of the gap in military, navy and air branches between the South Korean forces and the Soviet and Chinese-supported North Korean military. For instance, the North Korean Soviet T-34 tanks are described as "invincible monsters to the South Korean soldiers who had neither the tanks of their own nor any weapon to destroy them".

While the North Korean troops are described as "well-prepared", supported by the USSR military advisory group, and "reinforced by China", the South Korean troops are depicted as "fatigued", but at the same time "desperate" to stop North Korean's advance. The exhibits highlight single actions by South Korean soldiers to frame them as heroic. For instance, the exhibition recalls that:

> On June 26 in the Western Front, Major Kim Pung-ik failed to destroy the tanks with 105mm howitzers, but he and his soldiers managed to destroy the lead tanks with frontal fire at a close range. All of them were killed during the desperate battle.

The exhibit also highlights how the 57 South Korean pilots–emphasizing that these were the only pilots of the South Korean air force at the outbreak of the war–manually dropped bombs and grenades that had been "hastily manufactured by the Army Ordnance Depot", risking their lives from the enemy fighters and anti-aircraft guns. A bust of Brigadier General Lee Geun-seok, Commander of a Fighter Wing is displayed to celebrate his "gallant self-sacrifice" for which he was posthumously awarded the *Taegeuk* Cordon (the First-Class Order of Military Merit).

Therefore, the narrative seems to illustrate that, despite their weaker position, the South Korean forces fought until the very last minute and sacrificed themselves, before the intervention of the UN forces. The latter is described as a delaying action which allowed for the South Korean forces to reorganize. As David Kim points out, this discourse highlights the centrality of Korean soldiers over the UN and U.S. troops.[462] This is done also through exhibits illustrating the involvement of child soldiers and student volunteers to show that the entire nation was fighting.[463]

This narrative of victimization coincides with the one portrayed at the NMKCH, although the imbalance of forces in the War Memorial is more visually striking, thanks to the physical display of warfare, real-life mannequins of Korean soldiers, and the use of contrasting colors and eye-catching illustrations. Unlike the NMKCH, which has a more sober and linear approach, the memorial makes a greater use of technological instruments and displays, such as the use of sound effects, and immersive 3-D spaces.[464]

These technologies aim at creating an immersive experience of the trauma of the war that resonates with the visitors, especially younger ones, who did not experience it first-hand, therefore, eliciting an emotional response.[465] An example is the exhibition of the Han River Defense Line from June 28 to July 3, 1950, which displays a realistic battlefield scene with life-sized mannequins representing the South Korea army, positioned behind defensive trenches on the riverbank (Figure 7 and 8). Behind the diorama there is a screen projecting a sample footage of the exchange of fire between the Southern and Northern troops on both sides of the

---

[462] Ibid., p. 58.

[463] Hong Kal, "Commemoration and the Construction of Nationalism", p. 47.

[464] Daniel Y. Kim, "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory", p. 41.

[465] Ibid.

river. Sound effects recreate the demolition of the Han River Bridge by the South Korean troops to delay the North's advance.

**Figure 7.** Display of the Han River Defense Line. Picture taken by the author at the War Memorial of Korea.

**Figure 8.** Display of the Han River Defense Line. Picture taken by the author at the War Memorial of Korea.

The exhibition extensively dwells on the atrocities committed by the North Korean forces. Images of deceased civilians and relatives looking for their lost family members are displayed on the walls alongside descriptions of forced kidnappings and "executions of right-wing supporters, wealthy people, civil servants, religious leaders and family members of the ROK military and police", accused of being reactionaries by the North.

The exhibit states that, as a result of these acts, "many leftists who dreamed of an ideal society turned against Communism", while others "joined the North Korean forces to survive", after the North Koreans confiscated households' food. This narrative resembles the discourses of Rhee Syngman and Park Chung-hee who sought to lift Koreans' responsibility by portraying communism as an unnatural, and externally imposed phenomenon to Korea. Moreover, the exhibits omit the killings and similar crimes committed by the South Korean forces and right-wing youth groups against their own citizens with the justification of fighting communism.

Lastly, as Kim points out, the exhibition in the Korean War Room III ends on a triumphant note celebrating the UN intervention as a crucial turning point for the achievement of

international peace and freedom.[466] The exhibition displays the UN flag, photographs, videos explaining the background of UN's intervention as well as the UN Security Council Resolutions 82, 83, and 84 that were passed to address North Korea's aggression and provide the international legal authority for member states to restore peace on the Korean Peninsula.[467]

Kim argues that, while the War Memorial centers Korean soldiers as the main subjects and protagonists of the war, by commemorating the decisive role of the UN and U.S. soldiers, and the ROK's willingness to cooperate with the American military in subsequent scenarios (i.e. Vietnam War), it shows how South Korean soldiers have also been contributors to world peace.[468]

## 3.6 Final Thoughts

The literature and the analysis of the exhibitions at the War Memorial of Korea suggest that the anti-communist rhetoric of the military regimes still plays an important role in the state-led construction of national identity. However, the memorial also reflects the persistence of a national identity based on a collective ethnic identification with North Korea, which, as illustrated in the previous chapter, has been used by South Korean liberal political and social forces to delegitimize the conservatives' nationalist credentials.

This nation-centered rhetoric differentiates the War Memorial of Korea from the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, where the New Right's influence is more visible. This narrative contradiction in the memorial is not surprising considering the contested nature of South Korea's collective memory. Recently, the War Memorial has been at the center of another contentious episode.

In June 2026, the Korea War Memorial Organization was criticized for using a promotional poster titled "The Korean War: Different Interpretations", depicting two boys facing each other, one viewing the war with the "June 25" narrative, while the other understanding the conflict with the Chinese narrative, framing the war as a conflict of resistance against the United States aggression.[469] The poster was promoting an educational program for elementary school

---

[466] Ibid., p. 53.

[467] "Permanent Exhibition, Field of Discovery (UN's Participation and Impact)", Korea War Memorial Organization, accessed September 6, 2026,https://www.warmemo.or.kr:8443/Eng/E20000/E20100/E20105/html

[468] Daniel Y. Kim, "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory", p. 53.

[469] Seung-yeon Kim, "Controversy erupts over war memorial agency's use of China's Korean War propaganda", Yonhap News Agency, June 9, 2026, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260609009551315

students, which according to one official had the purpose of presenting a critical analysis of China's narrative, and not to teach the war through the Chinese perspective.[470]

The poster was eventually removed from the website, and the program was canceled.[471] Ahn Gyu-back, the then-Minister of Defense and veteran lawmaker in the liberal bloc, addressed the controversy by stating that the intent of the program was to convey "the historical fact that the Korean War began with North Korea's illegal invasion of the South".[472] This controversy illustrates how even more critical understandings of the war can trigger the issues' sensitivity, and points out to the persistence of the "*Yu-gi-oh*" narrative in South Korean society.

In conclusion, the analysis of the two museums raises questions about how the NMKCH and the WMK can contribute to national reconciliation and transitional justice. The narratives in both museums emphasize South Korea's victimhood identity. The NMKCH addresses more openly uncovered memories, such as the Jeju Uprising, and the role of the pro-democracy movement, although only partially.

On the other hand, the WMK does not cover the alternative and contrasting memories of the country's past and preserves the anti-communist narrative by omitting the state's responsibility in the mass killings of civilians during the war. Moreover, it should be noted that its focus is on the country's military history, which may justify the neglect of the post-war developments, including the decades of military dictatorships, the rapid economic industrialization and modernization, and the democratic transition.

While the findings of the Truth Commissions have opened the debate by uncovering previously silenced memories of South Korea's past, the contested nature of both museums indicates that the process of transitional justice and reconciliation is still ongoing and that it is strictly dependent on power politics and contested constructions of national identity.

---

[470] "Controversy erupts over war memorial agency's use of China's Korean War propaganda", Korea Times, June 9, 2026,https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/defense/20260609/controversy-erupts-over-war-memorial-agencys-use-of-chinas-korean-war-propaganda

[471] Seung-yeon Kim, "Controversy erupts".

[472] Ibid.

# Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to understand how and to what extent South Korea's collective memory has shaped its policies towards the North since the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 until the present day. The study has contributed to constructivist explanations of foreign policy, showing that there is no linear causal explanation between collective memory and foreign policy. Instead, the thesis found that ontological security, as a form of state interest, can act as a mediating variable between collective memory and national identity.

The analysis of presidential speeches in Chapter 2 has shown that through the functional use of memory, state narratives can impact the construction of national identity by framing North Korea as the significant Other. The study has also demonstrated that narratives can either challenge ontological security, or reaffirm it. The interaction of all these variables has contributed to shape South Korea's North Korea policy, alongside structural and material explanations.

The analysis of the presidential speeches suggests three ways through which collective memory has shaped South Korea's policy towards the North: first, by reframing the narrative of the war and of the North to preserve ontological security during Park Chung-hee's regime; second, through the reformulation of national identity based on the idea of a shared-ethnic community with the North, and on the principles of democracy and freedom during the Kim Dae-jung's administration; and third, by re-affirming the construction of the North as a security threat, by using anti-communism as a tool of state legitimization during the Yoon Suk-yeol's administration.

During the Korean War, and during the post-war military rule, South Korea's leaders framed the country as the victim of the North's "illegal and planned invasion" of June 25. This *"Yu-gi-oh"* narrative created a national identity based on victimhood, and reflected the Cold War anti-communist rhetoric, which framed North Korea as the Soviet Union's "puppet regime".

During the international détente of the 1970s, the easing of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the U.S. normalization of diplomatic relations with China, as well as internal pressures, compelled Park Chung-hee's regime to change its confrontational stance towards North Korea with a policy of peaceful reunification.

The analysis of Park's speeches found that to justify this policy change, the president had to re-frame his narrative to avoid disrupting South Korea's ontological security based on a foundational opposition with the North. The president reaffirmed the construction of North Korea as the enemy, and framed the new policy measures as temporary. Anti-communism was not only

used to construct South Korea's national identity, but it also served to legitimize President Park's regime and to justify the repression of political opposition.

The analysis further illustrated that the emergence of counter-political- and social forces following the country's transition to democracy opened the space for alternative narratives of South Korea's past and consequently of its national identity in relation to North Korea. The so-called "historiographical revolt" of Leftist scholars in the late 1980s started to contest the hegemonic narratives, challenging the legitimacy of the conservative political elite. In particular, these scholars called out the conservatives' collaborationist past, undermining their nationalist credentials and challenging the legitimacy of the state.

The military regimes had combined (anti-imperialist) nationalism with anti-communism through the narrative of anti-Soviet resistance, creating a hegemonic narrative framing South Korea as the only legitimate state of the Korean nation. Conversely, due to its association with the Soviet Union and the Northern regime, communism was framed as anti-national. By exposing the conservative elites' collaboration with foreign powers, namely Japan and the United States, nationalism started to become associated with the Left.

These counter-hegemonic narratives were not limited to the academic field but had a concrete impact on South Korea's policy towards the North, translating into Kim Dae-jung's engagement policy. The Policy of Reconciliation and Cooperation, also known as Sunshine Policy, was based on the idea of a shared Korean-ness and ethnic brotherhood with the North originating in Korea's struggle against Japanese imperialism.

In this regard, the analysis of President Kim's discourses also exposed the construction of a national identity based on the principles of democracy and freedom, and the construction of his "government of the people" and of the Republic of Korea as the direct successor of the 1919 Provisional Government of Korea. On the other hand, the analysis of Yoon Suk-yeol's presidential speeches showed that in post-democratic South Korea, securitization of relations with the North, and the anti-communist rhetoric are still employed to justify repressive behavior at home.

The constructivist framework was combined with the English School's approach to international relations, highlighting the role of international society. Specifically, the thesis illustrated the impact of international normative pressures, such as democratic and human rights discourses on domestic memory politics.

In particular, the study showed how mechanisms of transitional justice and reconciliation impacted ontological security, by challenging state narratives, and influenced changes in discourse and collective memory. Chapter 3 presented a reconstruction of the evolution of

transitional justice and reconciliation in South Korea since the liberation from Japanese colonial rule until the present day.

The analysis of the evolution of the redress movement has shown that the process of coming to terms with the past has been far from linear, and it is still incomplete. Mechanisms of transitional justice and reconciliation, including the 2000 Jeju April 3 Commission, and the 2005 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea have uncovered the omitted memories of the Korean War and national division.

They shed light on the extensive mass killings of civilians perpetrated during the war by the South Korean and U.S. authorities, alongside those committed by the North Korean troops. The commissions also unveiled mass killings, human rights abuses, disappearances, and forced conscription of students committed by the military regimes of Park Chung-he and Chun Doo-hwan.

Accordingly, the "*Yu-gi-oh*" narrative framing South Korea as the victim of the North's invasion was challenged.

The exhibitions on the Korean War at the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History have partly addressed the mass killings committed by the South Korean and U.S. troops during the conflict. For instance, before the renovations in 2022, the exhibits discussed in greater detail the Jeju Massacre and extensively addressed human right abuses of the military regimes, giving greater space to the process of democratization. However, the latest renovations that took place under Yoon's administration have considerably modified the exhibitions, reducing the coverage of unearthed instances of state violence. The renewed exhibitions seem to reflect the New Right's revisionist and state-centered narratives.

On the other hand, the War Memorial of Korea illustrates the tense coexistence between the hegemonic victimhood identity and anti-communist rhetoric, and national identity based on a shared Korean-ness with the North. Nevertheless, this nationalism serves to frame South Korea as the only legitimate state of the Korean nation, under whose guidance an eventual reunification has to take place. Although both museums mostly reflect conservative and state-directed narratives, their history and recent developments suggest that collective memory is still highly contested and is strictly dependent on party politics.

This thesis contributes to the literature of memory politics, by providing an analytical framework applicable to similar post-colonial contexts, and instances of national division, where ontological security and transitional justice intersect to shape foreign policy. This work has also contributed to the analysis of memory in the East Asian context by focusing on inter-Korean relations, a case often overlooked.

However, the study presents some limitations. First, Critical Discourse Analysis of speeches was limited to the presidents, excluding other political actors, which might provide only a partial representation of state narratives. Future analysis could address speeches of other government officials, such as ministers of unification, ministers of foreign affairs, or members of the National Assembly.

Second, future studies could also investigate additional practices of memory politics, such as definition and modification of history textbooks, and the creation and revision of commemoration days. As illustrated with the cases of President Lee Myung-bak's attempted reframe of August 15th as "National Foundation Day", or with President Park Geun-hye's attempted school textbooks reform, these practices also reflect state narratives.

Then, as the main scope of this thesis was the analysis of state narratives, the study was limited to two state-sponsored memory sites. To better account for non-state narratives, future research can focus on the comparison of state-led museums with more critical memory sites, such as the National Museum of Korean Democracy or the Jeju 4.3 Memory Park. These sites could better account for contrasting memories and narratives.

Moreover, integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with interviews with museum visitors could also enhance the understanding of the impact of museums on collective memory, and better account for different perspectives.

To conclude, this thesis has illustrated that the perpetuation of the "unending conflict" does not depend on external factors alone, but also on the competing identity constructions within South Korean memory politics, pointing to the relevance of memory and identity in the formulation of foreign policy and in international relations.

## Bibliography

*Books*

Assmann, Aleida. "Memory, Individual and Collective." *In The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, edited by Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly, 210-227. Oxford University Press, 2006.

Coser, Lewis A. *The Heritage of Sociology.* The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Dunne, Timothy. *Inventing international society: a history of the English School*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.

Fiori, Antonio. *L'Asia orientale: dal 1945 ai giorni nostri*. Il Mulino, 2010.

Gould, Harry D. "What is at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?" In *International Relations in a constructed world*, edited by Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert, 79-101. Routledge, 2015.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "Memoria individuale e memoria collettiva". In *La memoria collettiva (1950)*, edited by Paolo Jedlowski and Teresa Grande, 79-123. Edizioni Unicopli, 2001.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "Memoria collettiva e memoria storica". In *La memoria collettiva (1950)*, edited by Paolo Jedlowski and Teresa Grande, 123-167. Edizioni Unicopli, 2001.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), edited by Jean-Marie Tremblay. Digital edition, Les Classiques des sciences sociales, 2002.

Hwang, Kyung M. *A History of Korea: an episodic narrative*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Kim, Samuel S. *The two Koreas and the great powers*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kim, Sunhyuk. *The politics of democratization in Korea: The role of civil society*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.

Krüger, Anne K. "From Truth to Reconciliation: The Global Diffusion of Truth Commissions." In *Reconciliation, Civil Society, and the Politics of Memory*, edited by Birgit Schwelling, 339-367. Transcript Verlag, 2012. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1xxswv.14

Levin, Norman D., and Yong-Sup Han. *Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate over Policies Toward North Korea*. RAND Corporation, 2002.

Meyer, Michael. "Between Theory, Method, and Politics: Positioning of the Approaches to CDA." In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, edited by Michael Meyer and Ruth Wodak, 1-15. SAGE Publications, 2001. http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020.n2

Onuf, Nicholas. "Constructivism: A user's manual." In *International Relations in a constructed world*, edited by Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert, 58-78. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998.

Peterson, Mark. *A brief history of Korea*. Infobase Publishing, 2009.

Riotto, Maurizio. *Storia della Corea dalle origini ai giorni nostri.* Bompiani, 2018.

Snyder, Scott. *South Korea at the Crossroads, Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers.* Columbia University Press, 2018.

Son, Sarah."South Korean national identity and inter-Korean relations since 1945." In *Routledge handbook of contemporary South Korea*, 1-19. Edited by Sojin Lim, and Niki J.P. Alsford. Routledge, 2021.

Watson, Adam. *The Evolution of International Society: a comparative historical analysis*. Routledge, 2002.

Weldes, Jutta, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson, et al. "Constructing Insecurity." In *Cultures of insecurity: states, communities, and the production of danger*, edited by Jutta Weldes, Mark Laffey, Hugh Gusterson et al., 1-35. University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Wendt, Alexander. "The state and the problem of corporate agency." In *Social theory of international politics*, edited by Steve Smith, Thomas Biersteker, Chris Brown, et al, 193-245. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

*Journal Articles*

Arenhövel, Mark. "Democratization and transitional justice." *Democratisation* 15, no. 3 (2008): 570-587. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340801991114

Bachleitner, Kathrin. “Diplomacy with Memory: How the Past Is Employed for Future Foreign Policy.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 4 (2019): 492–508. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26985254

Bevir, Mark, and Ian Hall. "Interpreting the English school: History, science and philosophy." *Journal of International Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (2020): 120-132. https://doi.org/10.1177/1755088219898884

Blommaert, Jan and Chris Bulcaen. “Critical discourse analysis.” *Annual review of Anthropology* 29, no.1 (2000): 447-466. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.29.1.447

Buzan, Barry. "The English School: an underexploited resource in IR." *Review of international studies* 27, no.3 (2001): 471-488. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210501004715

Choi, Jong Kun. "Sunshine over a barren soil: the domestic politics of engagement identity formation in South Korea." *Asian Perspective* 34.4 (2010): 115-138.

Choi, Yong Sub. "Kim Dae-jung and the persistence of anti-communist hegemony in South Korea." *Asian Studies Review* 41.2 (2017): 299-316.

Cho, Kuk. "Transitional justice in Korea: Legally coping with past wrongs after democratization." *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal Association* 16, no. 3 (2007): 579-611.

Cho, Young C. “Collective identity formation on the Korean Peninsula: United States' different North Korea policies, Kim Dae-Jung's Sunshine Policy, and United States–South Korea–North Korea relations.” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 10, no. 1 (2010): 93-128. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26159527

Chung, Chien-peng. "Democratization in South Korea and inter-Korean relations." *Pacific Affairs* 76, no.1 (2003): 9-35.

Das, Runa. “Critical social constructivism: ‘culturing’ identity, (in) security, and the state in international relations theory.” *Indian Journal of Political Science* 70, no. 4 (2009): 961–982. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4274401

Devlen, Balkan, Patrick James, and Özgür Özdamar. "The English School, international relations, and progress." *International Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2005): 171-197. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2005.00480.x

Dian, Matteo. “Interpreting Japan’s contested memory: Conservative and progressive traditions.” *International Relations* 29, no. 3 (2015): 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117815600932

Do, Myoun-Hoi. “Ten Years of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History From a Historian’s Perspective”. *Public History & Museum* 5 (2022): 90-104.

Doty, Roxanne L. “Foreign Policy as Social Construction : A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsungency Policy in the Philippines.” *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1993): 297-320. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2600810

Finnemore, Martha, and Alexander Wendt. "When ‘old’ constructivism was new: reflections on classical constructivism." *Perspectives on Politics* 22, no. 4 (2024): 1248-1268. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001464

Glucksam, Noga. “I fear, therefore I am: Victimhood and the struggle for ontological security in the Liberia truth commission.” *Civil Wars* 20, no. 1 (2018): 89-108. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2018.1466090

Gray, Kevin. "Inter-Korean relations and the end of peaceful reunification: a social conflict approach." *The Pacific Review* (2026): 1-27.

Gudgeon, Dan. “Fateful moments and narrative change during conflict: navigating ontological security for the Korean peace process.” *Security Dialogue* 00, no. 0 (2026): 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1093/secdia/xhag011

Gustafsson, Karl. "Memory politics and ontological security in Sino-Japanese relations." *Asian Studies Review* 38.1 (2014): 71-86.

Hanley, Paul. "Transitional justice in South Korea: One country’s restless search for truth and reconciliation." *East Asia Law Review* 9.2 (2014): 139-166.

Hao Yufan, and Zhai Zhihai. "China's decision to enter the Korean War: History revisited." *The China Quarterly* 121 (1990): 94-115.

Hong, Christine. “The Unending Korean War.” *positions*, 23 no.4 (2015): 597–617.

Hong, Seuk-ryule. "Finding the truth on the suspicious deaths under South Korea's military dictatorship." *Korea Journal* 42, no.3 (2002): 139-162.

Hovhannisyan, Armen. "Interaction between Collective Memory and Foreign Policy Making Process: A Social Constructivist Approach." *Monitor Strategic* 3-4 (2014): 36-46.

Huntington, Samuel P. "Democracy's third wave." *Journal of democracy* 2, no. 2 (1991): 12-34.

Jager, Sheila Miyoshi. "Monumental histories: Manliness, the military, and the war memorial." *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 387-409.

Jung, Byung-joon. “Attempts to Settle the Past during the April Popular Struggle.” *Korea journal* 42, no. 3 (2002): 87–111.

Kal, Hong. "Commemoration and the Construction of Nationalism: War Memorial Museums in Korea and Japan." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 6, no. 9 (2008): 38-67. https://apjjf.org/hong-kal/2880/article

Kang, Han. *Human Acts*. Translated by Deborah Smith. Portobello Books, 2016.

Kang, Hye Yun. "Act of violence: Undecidability and embodiment in the Geochang civilian massacre." *Violence: An International Journal* 3, no. 2 (2022): 162-178.

Kang, Hye Yun. "Narratives of Crisis: Korean War Narratives and the Subject Formation of South Korea." *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (2025): 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksaf057

Kasmi, Jetnor. "Dealing with the past and the path to transitional justice: A comparative analysis of South Korea and Albania." *Asian Politics & Policy* 16, no. 1 (2024): 57-77.

Kim, Daniel Y. "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory and the Korean War: Militarism and Neo-Liberalism in The Price of Freedom and the War Memorial of Korea." *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 4, no. 1 (2015): 40-70.

Kim, Dong-Choon. "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation: Unwavering Attempts to Achieve Justice in South Korea." *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 525-552.

Kim, Dong-Choon. "The truth and reconciliation commission of Korea: uncovering the hidden Korean War." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 8, no. 9 (2010): 1-12.

Kim, Hun Joon. "Trial and Error in Transitional Justice: Learning from South Korea's Truth Commissions." *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review* 19, no. 1 (2013): 125-167.

Kim, Hun Joon. "Truth commissions and collective memory in South Korea: achievements and challenges." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* (2025): 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2558982

Kocan, Faris. "Collective memory and an interpretative approach: The struggle over Kosovo's independence as an ideational background for contemporary Serbia's foreign policy choices." *PolitičKa Misao 56,* no. 3–4 (2019): 200–217. https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.56.3-4.09

Kwak, Tae Yang. "The Nixon Doctrine and the Yusin reforms: American foreign policy, the Vietnam War, and the rise of authoritarianism in Korea, 1968–1973." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 12, no.1-2 (2003): 33-57.

Kraft, Diane. "South Korea's National Security Law: A tool of oppression in an insecure world." *Wisconsin International Law Journal* 24, no.2 (2006): 627-659.

Lee, Seungik. "Everyday life during Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship in South Korea after the 1972 Yushin Constitution." *Politeja* 1, no. 95 (2025): 57-71.

Mälksoo, Maria. "The transitional justice and foreign policy nexus: the inefficient causation of state ontological security-seeking." *International Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2019): 373-397. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy006

Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. "Remembering the Unfinished Conflict: Museums and the Contested Memory of the Korean War." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 7, no. 29 (2009): 1-24.

Mosler, Hannes B. "The far right and democratic backsliding in South Korea: mainstreaming, normalization, and radicalization." *Frontiers in Political Science* 8 (2026): 1-15.

Mutoni, Uwase N. "The Role of Memory in Shaping National Identity." *Eurasian Experiment Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2025): 169-176. https://www.eejournals.org/

Nguyen, Phuong A. "Engaging With *Temporal Others*: Memory, Trauma and (In) security Across Time." *Millennium* 53, no.3 (2025): 631–657. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298251362242

Nora, Pierre. "Between memory and history: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7-24. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928520

Oaten, Alexander. "The cult of the victim: an analysis of the collective identity of the English Defence League." *Patterns of Prejudice* 48, no. 4, (2014): 331–349. https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2014.950454

Olick, Jeffrey K. “Introduction: Memory and the Nation: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations.” *Social Science History* 22, no .4 (1998): 377–387. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1171569

Podoler, Guy. "The past under the shadow of the present: The case of the national museum of Korean contemporary history." *Asian Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (2017): 424-440.

Poulshock, Michael. “On the Unification of Neorealism and Neoliberalism.” *SSRN*, 2024. 2, 2024. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4755375

Reus-Smit, Christian. “Imagining society: constructivism and the English School.” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4, no. 3 (2002): 487–509.

Reus-Smit, Christian. “The constructivist Turn: Critical Theory After the Cold War.” Working Paper No. 1996/4: 1-16. Series: Australian National University, Dept. of International Relations. http://hdl.handle.net/1885/41066

Ruoff, Kenneth, J. "How Museums in the Republic of Korea Narrate National History." *The Journal of Northeast Asian History* 14.2 (2017): 119-188.

Shen Zhihua. "Sino-Soviet relations and the origins of the Korean War: Stalin's strategic goals in the Far East." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2, no. 2 (2000): 44-68.

Sierp, Aline. “The politics of memory: Between history, identity and conflict.” *Government and Opposition* 60, (2025): 1464–1483. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.10011

Sorensen, Eli Park. "Brothers Home and the production of vanished lives." *Genealogy* 7, no. 4 (2023): 1-15. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7040101

Suh, Jae-Jung. “Truth and reconciliation in South Korea: Confronting war, colonialism, and intervention in the Asia Pacific.” *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 503-524. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2010.515386

Verovšek, Peter J.” Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: the politics of memory as a research paradigm.” *Politics, Groups,and Identities* 4, no.3 (2016): 529-543. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2016.1167094

Vierthaler, Patrick. "The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History: A Contested Site of Cultural Memory." *European Journal of Korean Studies* 23 (2024): 117-146.

Watson, Iain. "Cultural identity and securitising the Korean Peninsula: Transformations in the South Korean security narrative." *Geopolitics* 17, no. 3 (2012): 429-454.

Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics." *International organization* 46*, no.* 2 (1992): 391-425. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706858

Wendt, Alexander. "Collective Identity Formation and the International State." *American Political Science Review*, 88, no. 2 (1994): 384-396. https://doi.org/10.2307/2944711

Wight, Martin. "An anatomy of international thought." *Review of international studies* 13, no. 3 (1987): 221-227.

Wolman, Andrew. "Looking back while moving forward: The evolution of Truth Commissions in Korea. " *Asian-Pacific Law & Policy Journal 14,* no. 3 (2012): 27-53.

Woo, Seongji. "The Park Chung-hee administration amid inter-Korean reconciliation in the détente period: Changes in the threat perception, regime characteristics, and the distribution of power." *Korea Journal* 49, no. 2 (2009): 37-58.

Yang, Myungji. "Camouflaged extremism: Authoritarian legacies and the far right in South Korea." *Critical Asian Studies* 57, no. 3 (2025): 392-412.

Yang, Sungik. "An Old Right in New Bottles: State without Nation in South Korean New Right Historiography." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 4 (2021): 889-909.

*News Articles*

Al Jazeera. "South Korea's President Yoon arrested over short-lived martial law attempt" January 15, 2025.
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/15/south-korean-investigators-enter-presidents-home-in-second-arrest-attempt

Ewe Koh, Tessa Wong, Nick Marsh, Jake Kwon and Yuna Ku. “Fear, fury and triumph: Six hours that shook South Korea”. *BBC News*, December 4, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c98lygwd837o

KBS World. “July 4 Joint Statement of 1972” March 8, 2018. https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/contents_view.htm?lang=e&menu_cate=history&id=&board_seq=8

Kim, Eun-gyeong. “Supreme Court Sues Court Riot Convicts for 1.18 Billion Won”. *The Chosun Daily*, August 27, 2026.https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2026/08/27/GTKR6JC53ZBFTGABVUGCGTLV7E/

Kim, Seung-yeon. “Controversy erupts over war memorial agency's use of China's Korean War propaganda”. *Yonhap News Agency*, June 9, 2026. https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260609009551315

Kim, Tong-hyung. “South Korea Relaunches Truth Commission With Focus on Adoption Fraud”. *Frontline*. February 26, 2026. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/south-korea-truth-commission-adoption-fraud/

Koo, A-mo. “Truth Commission Acknowledges State Responsibility in 20,000 Cases”. *The Chosun Daily.* November 18, 2025. https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/11/18/PHPFRBXHXZEXPIQ2JH7H4FIZRE/

Korea JoongAng Daily. “Transcript: President Yoon Suk Yeol’s speech to declare emergency martial law” December 4, 2024. https://www.koreajoongangdaily.com/korea/transcript-president-yoon-suk-yeols-speech-to-declare-emergency-martial-law/12475558

Korea Times. “Controversy erupts over war memorial agency's use of China's Korean War propaganda”. June 9, 2026. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/defense/20260609/controversy-erupts-over-war-memorial-agencys-use-of-chinas-korean-war-propaganda

Korea Times. “Removal of loudspeakers”. August 5, 2025. https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/editorial/20250805/ed-removal-of-loudspeakers

Park, Anna J. “South Korean president declares martial law claiming need to root out 'anti-state forces'”. *The Korea Times*, December 4, 2024.

https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20241204/south-korean-president-declares-martial-law-citing-anti-state-forces-threat-to-country

Power, John. "North Korea blasts South Korea's Lee as 'confrontation maniac'". *AlJazeera*, August 27, 2025.
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/27/north-korea-blasts-south-koreas-lee-as-confrontation-maniac

Seo Yoonjung, Gawon Bae, Mike Valerio and Jessie Yeung. "South Korea's impeached president is removed from office, four months after declaring martial law". *CNN World*, April 4, 2025. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/04/03/asia/yoon-impeachment-verdict-south-korea-intl-hnk

Stars and Stripes. "Rhee tells countrymen to scorn armistice pact". Accessed August 22, 2026. https://www.stripes.com/news/1953-06-25/rhee-tells-countrymen-to-scorn-armistice-pact-1873781.html1

The Guardian. "South Korea begins removing loudspeakers on border with North to reduce tensions". August 4, 2025.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/aug/04/south-korea-removing-loudspeakers-north

Time. "South Korea: The Accidental Assassination". August 26, 1974. https://time.com/archive/6878054/south-korea-the-accidental-assassination/

Yoo Joo-hee. "Lee Government's First Unification White Paper Defines Koreas as 'De Facto Two States'". *Seoul Economic Daily*. May 18, 2026.
https://en.sedaily.com/politics/2026/05/18/lee-governments-first-unification-white-paper-defines

*Websites*

Korea Legislation Research Institute. "National security act". Accessed September 21, 2026.
https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=26692&lang=ENG

Korea War Memorial Organization."Permanent Exhibition, Field of Discovery (UN's Participation and Impact)". Accessed September 6, 2026.
https://www.warmemo.or.kr:8443/Eng/E20000/E20100/E20105/html

Korea War Memorial Organization. "The Korean War Monument". Accessed September 6, 2026.
https://www.warmemo.or.kr:8443/Eng/E20000/E20100/E20110/html

Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives. “Commemorative Address for the 79th Anniversary of the March 1st Movement (Overcoming National Crises through the Spirit of Great Unity of the March 1st Movement)”. March 1, 1998. Accessed August 25, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1308527

Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives. “Statement on the 22nd Anniversary of the Korean War”. June 25, 1972. Accessed August 22, 2026. https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp

Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives. “Special Statement by the President on the Lifting of Emergency Measures No. 1 and No.3”, Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives. August 23, 1974. Accessed August 22, 2026, https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1306448

Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives. “Special Statement on Peace Unification Diplomacy Policy”. June 23, 1973. Accessed August 22, 2026. https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1306400

Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives . “104th Anniversary of the March 1st Independence Movement Ceremony. March 1, 2023. Accessed October 25, 2026. https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp?spMode=view&catid=c_pa02062&artid=1402194

Ministry of the Interior and Safety, Presidential Archives. “The 15th Presidential Inaugural Address (Let Us Open a New Era of Overcoming National Crises and Leaping Forward)”. February 25, 1998. Accessed August 25, 2026. https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp

National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, “Enjoying Rest and Contemplation: New Landscapes at the Museum,” *MUCH Webzine*, n. 77(2025), https://www.much.go.kr/resource/newsletter/vol.77/index.html

National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, “Taegeukgi: The Days We've Shared Together,” *MUCH Webzine*, n. 77(2025), https://www.much.go.kr/resource/newsletter/vol.77/index.html

Office of the Historian. “The Chargé in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State”. October 30, 1950. Accessed August 22, 2026. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d720

Office of the Historian.“The President of the Republic of Korea (Rhee) to President Truman”. July 19, 1950. Accessed August 22, 2026. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v07/d326

*Press Releases*

Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. “The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Renews Its Permanent Exhibition from ‘Independence and Division’ to ‘Independence and the Establishment of the ROK Government’”. Press release, January 3, 2023. https://www.mcst.go.kr/english/policy/pressView.jsp?pSeq=209

Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. “The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Reorganizes The Korean War Exhibition Sections”. Press release, August 9, 2022. https://www.mcst.go.kr/english/policy/pressView.jsp?pSeq=142

*Reports*

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea. *Truth and Reconciliation: Activities of the Past Three Years*. 2009. Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea. https://www.jinsil.go.kr/en/nac/selectNoticeDetail.do?bbsId=BBSMSTR_000000000723&nttId=314514

## Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to deeply thank my thesis supervisor, Professor Francesca Frassineti, for her constant support in the process of writing this research. I am truly grateful for her precious comments, suggestions and advice.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my family for always being there for me and for believing in me during both joyful and difficult times. In particular, I would like to thank my parents and my grandma for supporting my decision to study for a semester in Seoul, South Korea, a longheld dream of mine and a precious experience that greatly enriched this research. A special thanks also goes to my sister, who is always by my side, even from afar.

Lastly, I am grateful to all of my friends, colleagues and flatmates for making my time in Venice so special and for always being there for me. I am also thankful to all of my long-distance friends; your support is always deeply felt.