



***Cornerstone of the Nation: The Defense Industry and the Building of Modern Korea Under Park Chung Hee, Peter Banseok Kwon, Harvard University Press, 2024, 448 pp., hardcover, \$65.00***

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This review examines *Cornerstone of the Nation* by Peter Banseok Kwon, which explores the intertwined rise of South Korea's *chaebol* and its indigenous defense industry under Park Chung Hee. Kwon challenges state-centered narratives and U.S.-dependence assumptions, highlighting the roles of industrialists, scientists, and workers in militarized industrialization. While the book offers a detailed account of *chaebol*-state collaboration and technological innovation, it gives limited attention to labor exploitation and workplace struggles. Overall, it provides a significant contribution for scholars of Korean history, political economy, and U.S.-Korea relations.

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The rise of the *chaebol* (large family-owned conglomerates) is one of the most important events in the history of modern Korea. Under Park Chung Hee's authoritarian leadership from 1961 to 1979, South Korea's economy evolved from an agrarian backwater to an industrializing nation. In tandem, Korea's national defense industry advanced from a state of dependency on American aid to become increasingly self-reliant. Peter Banseok Kwon, an assistant professor at the University at Albany, SUNY, argues that the ascendancy of the *chaebol* was married to the development of Korea's defense industry, a relationship that has not received much attention in previous studies.

Kwon challenges the widely accepted idea that South Korea's military modernization relied exclusively on American technology and aid. He advocates for a more nuanced view of the prevailing "strong state, weak business" interpretation of the era to show that the megaconglomerates were partners in the shaping of the Korean economy and defense industry. Additionally, he writes that South Korea's economic development was the result of "an inharmonious yet complementary relationship between state-initiated modernization and civilian participation" (13). In other words, Korean industrial workers and scientists were "active agents in a radical reformulation of South Korea's national defense system" (4). The core of this thesis is that Korea's self-reliant national defense "did not come to fruition through state directives alone" (14).

An interesting point raised by the book is that while the United States made commitments to provide weapons, soldiers, and other resources to South Korea to bolster its defenses, it frequently failed to live up to its promises. For example, President Richard Nixon announced the withdrawal of American troops from Korea and delayed much-needed military aid critical to building Korean defenses. Kwon notes several occasions when the United States actively sought to undermine South Korean efforts to build weapons or develop military technology similar to its own. Kwon claims that the US wanted Korea to remain dependent upon American aid and often acted to undermine or interfere with South Korea's self-sufficiency. Among the book's fascinating elements are stories of how Korean scientists tried to reverse engineer American military hardware and technology.

*Cornerstone of the Nation* consists of five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 outlines the context for Park's drive to achieve an independent national defense industry by examining North Korea's hostile actions in the late 1960s and the perceived unreliability of America's security commitment. Chapter 2 analyzes Park's push for civilian heavy and chemical industries and the emergence of Korean defense industries beginning in 1973. Kwon refers to this as "militarized industrialization." This chapter gives considerable attention to Pohang Iron and Steel Company and the role of O Wŏnch'ŏl as a key policymaker in Park's administration.

Chapter 3 explores the transformation of the *chaebol* as partners in the growth of Korea's military self-sufficiency. Park required the *chaebol* to participate in defense-related industries if they hoped to have government backing for the growth of their civilian industries. This chapter uses explosives manufacturer Hanwha as a case study. Chapter 4 explores the emergence of a highly skilled workforce following Park's National Scientization Movement. Kwon notes that "South Korea's defense industrialization points to militarization as a primary force behind Korea's transformation into a science-oriented, technologically innovative state" (166).

Chapter 5 covers the development of the Yulgok Operation, an effort to build more advanced weapons, such as missiles and nuclear weapons. This chapter highlights the Korean effort to attain a more equal partnership with the United States and break away from being a client state. The Conclusion, which provides a narrative of the defense industry through to the Yoon presidency, reinforces the ideas that the state was not rigid and the development of the *chaebol* and defense industries were not as state-centered as the standard histories claim.

One shortcoming of this study is Kwon's emphasis on the patriotic cooperation of scientists and technicians who worked in the defense industries. The Park regime successfully garnered the support of industrial workers because of the collective memory of recent wars and Japanese colonialism. However, Kwon provides little coverage of the era's exploitive and militarized work conditions, low pay, union busting, and other forms of workplace tension. More attention to the hardships faced by workers at the hands of management, backed by union-busting government authorities, could have been a valuable addition to this study. And though the book acknowledges "cronyism, coercion of labor, policy priorities of business growth and scientific development at the expense of social equality and welfare" (279), it does not go into these in detail. Of course, as the book is already over 400 pages long, it may well have been wise to leave that topic for another study.

This book is a solid analysis of the rise of the *chaebol* and the emergence of the indigenous defense industry in South Korea, a nation that recently became one of the top ten in the world for arms exports. *Cornerstone of the Nation* will be valuable to graduate students and scholars of Korean history and political science and can be used in undergraduate courses that cover postwar Korea. I especially recommend Chapter 1, which gives a summary of the US-ROK security alliance in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Furthermore, Americanists who specialize in the Korean-American security alliance will find the book informative in its explanations of how American policies impacted a cold war ally.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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