INTRODUCTION

For twenty years after the end of the Second World War, the United States was the only truly global power with the capacity to deploy its armed forces anywhere in the world. The Cold War rhetoric expressing the need to defend 'the free world' against the threat from an allegedly monolithic Communist bloc may be seen as an attempt to establish a new pattern of international order. Many of the terms and concepts of that era reflected the concern to consolidate that 'free world' and to limit an alleged Communist expansionism. The latter aim involved primarily strategic and military priorities, and the former included the attempt to bolster both the national security and the domestic stability of frequently fragile allied governments. The predominance of American military and economic power meant that America's commitments to its allies were credible because US capabilities largely matched those commitments.

In Northeast Asia, the United States has held the key position in the balance-of-power system since the Korean War of 1950. That war profoundly influenced the pattern of American involvement in Asian affairs in general and in the future of Korea in particular. By intervening militarily to save South Korea from North Korean aggression, the United States established a balance of power against the Communists and set a precedent for future American participation in Asian conflicts. Since then, America's role as the 'determinant' of the regional balance has been institutionalized by the presence of sizable US forces in South Korea. This US military presence has constituted the dominant force not only in the Korean security system but also in East Asian power politics.

America's predominance, however, began to be eroded in the 1960s. Beginning in 1969 and carrying on into the 1980s, successive US Administrations have had to adjust the scope of their global commitments. America's allies in turn have had to make critical reap-

praisals of the utility and credibility of those commitments. Major changes in the international political system challenged American dominance. First, the Soviet Union emerged as a truly global military power. This change coincided with the erosion of the Pax Americana in the wake of the US failure in Vietnam. Second, at the same time the Sino-Soviet dispute escalated into armed conflict in 1969. This confrontation invalidated the conventional wisdom of the need to contain a supposed monolithic Sino-Soviet unity. Third, the change in Sino-American relations redefined the patterns of confrontation in the Asia-Pacific region in the post-Vietnam era. Fourth, the growing vitality of politico-economic power among the West European allies and Japan coincided with a decline in their willingness to heed American leadership. Finally, the challenge of the oil-producing and exporting countries (OPEC), linked with the self-assertion of the Third World, weakened the United States economically and diminished its capacity to intervene successfully with military forces in other countries. Of all these changes, however, no doubt the US failure in Vietnam was the single most important factor in undermining Americans' self-confidence in their capacity to manage the international order. That failure destroyed the consensus of the foreign-policy making elite that had relied habitually on the Cold War perspective. It also brought to an end the crusading spirit that had underlain much of American foreign policy especially in the 1950s.

The Watergate crisis also weakened the American presidency. This episode, coupled with the lack of consensus about the goals and the means of containment, led to a period of uncertainty in the making of foreign policy in Washington. That uncertainty has resulted in contradictory policies and a lack of clarity as to which institutions were the principal architects of foreign policy.

The primary purpose of this book is to examine the significance of South Korea in evolving American strategic thinking and its place among the changing priorities of America's global commitments during the 1970s. This examination will also involve identifying the domestic and external factors which have shaped American perceptions of Korea and have affected the character of the US commitment to South Korea. The American commitment has not only been indispensable to the survival of South Korea, it has also incorporated a fundamental moral dimension which derives from two separate yet related concerns. First, underlying the opposition to Communism

has been a determination to protect the values of 'the free world'. Second, the United States, having virtually created South Korea, thereby assumed moral obligations to its people.

To put it another way, from the American standpoint there are two dimensions to the maintenance of an interest in Korea. First, South Korea is important because of its position in the global conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union (or, as it was thought in 1950, the Sino-Soviet bloc). The Americans saw South Korea in terms of managing their global strategic balance, for it was pictured as a bulwark of the free world fighting against an alleged Communist threat. The Korean War provided the rationale for US determined opposition to rising Communist power elsewhere because that war fixed in American strategic thinking a sense of 'global consciousness'. Second, South Korea represents a moral obligation to America to help the truncated country because it was created by the US as part of the post-war territorial settlement in Asia.

Thus, America's policy towards South Korea has been motivated by the realities of global rivalry with the Communist great powers as well as by moral concerns for the divided country. But fundamentally it is the former which has underpinned the validity of the latter and also provided the rationale for the US maintaining a security alliance with South Korea. As the Korean experience of 1950–3 illustrated, the Cold War and balance-of-power considerations primarily motivated the extension of the US security commitment to South Korea. During the 1970s, however, American attitudes towards its Korean ally were subject to change. The major determinants of those changes stemmed from the objective realities of an evolving global balance of power and the subjective American perception of its reduced capacity to influence significantly the international order, rather than from anything inherent in the effort to sustain the bilateral security alliance with South Korea.

This much was evident in post-Vietnam adjustments in US security policy towards South Korea. The wounding experience of Vietnam and the consequent revulsion against the 'burdens of empire' generated strong pressures on successive US Administrations to reduce US military commitments in Asia made following the Korean War. Moreover, detente with China further reinforced the rationale for a military disengagement from China's periphery. The thaw in Sino-American relations, following the split in the Sino-

Soviet camp, made the US troop strengths in South Korea appear out of proportion to the threat as perceived by the United States. The US government now thought that the new balance-of-power relationship with the Communist great powers permitted it to reduce its military commitment to South Korea. The changes in the global balance even demanded a 'revision' of the spirit of the US–ROK (Republic of Korea – South Korea) alliance, based on the assumption that China was no longer a principal adversary.

The post-war American image of the inter-state system, and its perceived unique role within that system, was thus shaken by the Vietnam débâcle and the prospect of a pluralistic world. Yet, while the tragic result of the Vietnam involvement led to calls for an early withdrawal of part or all of the US forces stationed in South Korea, there were also contrary demands for continuing the US commitment to the country lest the alliance system disintegrate. The United States could not just give up the Korean alliance; it was still valued for the management of the central strategic balance with the Soviet Union. The American image of anti-Communist global engagement remained fundamentally valid in spite of the Vietnam experience.

Such dual objectives were clearly reflected in the formulation of the Nixon Doctrine and later in Carter's proposal for the removal of US troops from South Korea. Both US policies were designed, in large measure, to decouple US military commitments in the Asian periphery from its politico-moral commitment to anti-Communism by deemphasizing military considerations and military means in US alliance policy in the region. As South Korea became the only forward US base remaining in continental Asia, that country presented admittedly a challenge to reordering the relationship between the means and ends of US containment policy in Asia. This was a challenge to search for more efficacious means to achieve a credible US commitment – means which would both clearly reflect the implications of pluralism and enjoy domestic support.

What did all this mean for the future of the US–South Korean alliance? Would the Cold War alliance be able to survive despite the fundamental changes in the international system and in the American idealism of collective security that had in the past underpinned it? How was the US going to reconcile the necessity for the continued preservation of the alliance system with the imperative of post-Vietnam military disengagement from the area? These questions gave rise to acute psychological anxieties on the part of the

weaker ally and also contributed to political instability in American–South Korean security relations during the seventies.

This book examines the changing context of American–South Korean security relations. It will focus on three major aspects of an evolving American commitment. (1) In a strategic perspective, how have US efforts to adjust the degree of its military commitment to the ROK (Republic of Korea – South Korea) affected the deterrent and defence mechanism of the US commitment? Analysis of that aspect focuses on the role of US forces in both peace and war. (2) In a global perspective, how has the US attempted to substitute a balance-of-power policy with the Communist great powers for a military retreat from the Northeast Asian theatre? To what extent did that attempt represent an American search for a new equilibrium of power as opposed to an American retreat? (3) In a regional or local perspective, what stresses and strains occurred in the US–ROK alliance as the original monolithic Sino-Soviet threat subsided? Since the alliance was formed for specific Cold War reasons, its cohesion was bound to rise or fall with the changing conception of the threat as perceived by both parties. What would constitute America's 'vital' interest in sustaining an unequal security alliance with South Korea in a pluralistic world?

Of these three major aspects, the last one remained the most fundamental concern of the United States and its Korean ally. The problem of the American commitment to South Korea during the seventies was rooted in the sense of asymmetry between the American conception of national interest at stake in Korea and the costs it estimated to be necessary in honouring the commitment in the event of war. The task of achieving US credibility in South Korea was dependent upon the most fundamental question regarding the nature and importance of American interest in the country: did the US commitment match American interest?

Despite the 'morality' and 'legality' of American obligations to South Korea, the real American national interest in South Korea has been far less clear than the frequent reaffirmation of close alliance would seem to suggest. Indeed, unlike the US–Japan alliance, the US–ROK alliance did not provide the necessary political underpinning for a durable security system because of the lack of American national interest in Korea's intrinsic value. Nor was it based on anything like the kind of regional cohesion, common political values, or military potential that underlay the Atlantic alliance. As revealed by

the dual policies pursued by Presidents Nixon and Carter of a military disengagement without political abandonment of the Korean ally, a degree of expediency was inherent in US policy towards South Korea. For instance, the use of the word 'flexibility' in US security policy, as expressed in the Nixon Doctrine, in the Northeast Asian theatre was highly significant.[1] It called into question the essential aim and methods of the American commitment to the Republic. By 'flexibility', did the US envisage a fundamental reevaluation of its interest in and commitment to the ROK? Or rather was this term merely designed to indicate new forms of US involvement to achieve the familiar ends of American post-war policy: containment or stability? In effect, this new term revealed the limited nature of the underlying political consensus within the US establishment over protecting the Korean ally. Obviously, a decision to remain flexible in commitment policy implied an unwillingness to make a firm security pledge. As a result, flexible commitment to South Korea tended to become an euphemism for a policy of indecision. The importance of this point will become clear when the implications of the Nixon Doctrine are discussed.

A unifying theme of this thesis is the uncertain nature of a security commitment in an unequal alliance between a great and small power. An alliance between such partners involves an inherent difficulty arising from defining the nature of alliance commitment. In such an alliance, the mere existence of a commitment does not always guarantee that its purposes will be accomplished. A great power tends to promote alliances on the basis of a threat to the balance in the whole international system. The small power makes alliances in terms of a threat to its local balance. Inevitably, conflicts in perspective emerge.[2]

Let us take the US–ROK alliance as an example. From America's perspective, the criterion for evaluating the success of this alliance is clearly different from that of its Korean ally. The criterion is not exclusively whether the alliance provides the operational mechanism of deterrence and defence against North Korea, but whether it contributes to the policy of balance of power *vis-à-vis* the Communist great powers. Hence, the Korean alliance may be viewed primarily as a political and diplomatic instrument whose operational utility is basically conditioned by the nature of the central balance among the major powers, rather than by the existence of a local threat as such. If a local threat (i.e. the North Korean threat) does not appear to

affect the central balance, it may be ignored until it does. On the other hand, as the weaker party, South Korea is bound to seek an alliance relationship in which the US visibly closes the gap between its interests and its actual capability to protect the ally. For the ROK, the essence of the alliance is the additional force it provides (i.e. US forces in the ROK). The alliance deters war by making the threat of combined strength credible and it facilitates combined defence should deterrence fail.[3] Thus, the alliance is seen as an immediate and continuing necessity to implement security.

But the importance of the American perspective for the survival of the US–ROK alliance hardly needs emphasis. This is because, as the determining power in the regional balance, the United States has the ultimate choice of specific commitment to its weaker ally. Here, an obvious question arises as to the nature of an unequal alliance: if an alliance commitment is admittedly an uncertain instrument of power politics, why bother to ally at all? A common ideology such as anti-Communism may facilitate allied cohesion, but more fundamentally, it is common interests and aims which unite both parties in an effective operational alliance.

In the final analysis, an answer to any question concerning the ultimate success or failure of an unequal alliance must rest on empirical examination, not theoretical hypothesizing. It is hoped that the present study will provide some insight into alliance politics among unequal partners in the late twentieth century.

This study is not, however, intended to advance any 'solution' to the problem of maintaining a credible American commitment to South Korea. Its aim is to identify and elucidate the principal conditions that have influenced changing American perspectives in South Korea and to illuminate the overall intellectual and practical problems of the US–ROK alliance. In so doing, this study raises more questions than it attempts to settle.

Having set out the major themes and issues to which this book is addressed, it is appropriate to convey a short outline of its structure. Part One is devoted to an analysis of the foundation of US security policy towards Korea in the era following the Second World War. It examines the origins of America's involvement in Korean security and the development of a commitment. Part Two then centres on the transition in US foreign policy as the result of the Vietnam experience and the major changes in the international system. The analysis forcuses on the impact of the Vietnam War on US policy in East Asia

and the implications of the Nixon Doctrine for Korea. Chapter 3 examines the strategic dimensions, while Chapter 4 focuses on the balance-of-power aspects of the Nixon Doctrine. It is hoped that this discussion will clarify the problems that the US–ROK alliance faced in the early seventies. Based on these assessments, Chapter 5 discusses Carter's policy of troop withdrawals from South Korea. This is of central importance since that policy raised critical questions concerning the very viability of the US–ROK alliance. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes with an analysis of the nature of the evolving American commitment to South Korea with attention to its strategic, global, and regional aspects.

Part One

GENESIS

1. THE FOUNDATION OF US SECURITY POLICY IN KOREA

1. THE UNITED STATES AS A LIBERATOR

(i) At liberation

The central object of this chapter is twofold: first, to examine the origins of America's involvement in Korean affairs in the post-war era; and secondly, to assess in turn the place of South Korea's security in US global as well as regional strategy in the early Cold War years.

The 1940s were the decade that witnessed the transformation in America's policy from continental isolationism to one of globalism based on vast economic and military capability. America's ability to wage and win a two-front war with Germany to the east and Japan to the west demonstrated the superiority of American power.

It was in the Pacific that the United States had first trod the path to world power. The United States had become a Pacific power in 1898 when it annexed the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii as the result of the Spanish–American War.[1] The following year, the United States warned the European powers and Russia to keep their hands off China. John Hay's 'Open Door' note of September 1899 was the first time that the US has promulgated a general foreign-policy principle outside the Western Hemisphere.[2] American commercial interests in China made the Far East a centre of international rivalry and conflict with other big powers. Thus, it was in the Far East that the United States began to assume the role of a world power, and it was indeed its Far Eastern interests that later brought the US into conflict with the Russians.[3]

The 1940s were also the decade in which the international system was transformed into a bipolar world with the Soviet Union and the United States as the two predominant powers. The emergence of the