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**Reconsidering Jimmy Carter’s Foreign Policy Legacy in the Two Koreas**

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**<Abstract>**

When it comes to foreign policy, President Jimmy Carter has been widely criticized for a series of failures in diplomacy including the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union and the Iran hostage crisis. These failures are often attributed to his inexperience, idealism and/or moral policy. Most of the evaluations of his foreign policy have focused on the short-term ramifications of the US Cold War and have rarely considered its mid- and long-term legacies. This paper thus seeks to reevaluate the Carter Administration’s foreign policy by examining its impact on one of its main areas of influence: the two Koreas. Based on the research of Carter’s foreign policy toward South Korea during his presidency and his personal involvement in the North Korean nuclear issue after his presidency, it will provide a balanced view of Carter’s foreign policy legacy and demonstrate that he has significantly contributed to the peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and the East Asia region as well.

**I. Introduction**

When it comes to foreign policy, Jimmy Carter has been conventionally regarded as one of the most incapable presidents in US history. He has been depicted as a failed president not only by most US foreign policy textbooks but also scholastic books and articles dealing mainly with his presidency. Although recently there have been some positive evaluations of his foreign policy, the conventional wisdom has not changed that his foreign policy was “simplistic,” “naïve,” “incoherent,” “inconsistent,” “weak,” “unprepared,” “shallow,” “unsystematic,” “indecisive,” “ambitious” “hapless,” “ineffective,” and “incapable.” Even one of the most recent and comprehensive books on US foreign relations also negatively evaluates Carter’s foreign policy. (Herring, 2008) He is particularly criticized for a series of diplomatic blunders dealing with the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union and the Iran hostage crisis. These failures are often attributed to his inexperience, idealism and/or moral policy (Hoffman, 1977-78; Kirkpatrick, 1979 and 1981; Stoessinger 1985, Muravchik, 1986; Spencer, 1988; Ambrose, 1992; Stueck, 1998).

Not only has his general foreign policy such as human rights foreign policy and moral politics been criticized especially as “inconsistent” and “ineffective,” but also his foreign policies toward specific regions and states. When it comes to his policy toward the two Koreas (Republic of Korea, conventionally South Korea, and Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, conventionally North Korea), it is argued that his moral politics or human rights foreign policy were not effectively applied. A further criticism is that compared to his human rights foreign policy toward South American countries, his policy toward South Korea was somewhat disappointing, while Carter is also not seen to have implemented his human rights foreign policy into South Korea, due mainly to its security concerns about North Korea. Furthermore, his plan to withdraw US forces from South Korea was not welcomed not only by the Park Chung Hee government but also by the opposition party and NGOs in South Korea. (Park, 2009: 217).

Whether positive or negative, however, the evaluations of his foreign policy have two limitations. First, most of the evaluations of his foreign policy have focused on the short-term ramifications for the US Cold War and rarely considered its mid- and long-term legacies. Second, his foreign policy has been evaluated only in terms of US national interests. For a balanced assessment, we will consider a long-term impact of his foreign policy from the perspective of its recipients.

This paper thus seeks to reevaluate the Carter administration’s foreign policy by examining its impact on the two Koreas. Conducting a case study based on Carter’s foreign policy toward South Korea during his presidency and his personal involvement in the North Korean nuclear issue after his presidency, it will strive to strike a balanced view of Carter’s foreign policy. This paper particularly attempts to overcome the dichotomous assessment of success or failure and traces both the limitations and achievements together.

 **II. Literature Review**

Even during his presidency, President Carter’s foreign policy was severely criticized mainly by Republicans and conservative political groups (Hoffman, 1977-78; Kirkpatrick, 1979). But foreign policy scholars and diplomatic historians were also critical and judgmental of Carter’s foreign policy. Those criticisms can be characterized by such words as “simplistic,” “naïve,” “inconsistent,” “weak,” “unprepared,” “shallow,” “unsystematic,” “indecisive,” “ambitious” “hapless,” “ineffective,” and “incapable.”

Criticisms of Carter’s foreign policy can be divided into three different levels of analyses, although they are not mutually exclusive: individual, domestic, and international. On the individual level, first, some condemn Carter’s foreign policy for his naïve idealism and moral politics, while others disparage his foreign policy for his unpreparedness and indecision. The former regards Carter’s policy infeasible, while the latter believes that although Carter’s projects were not impossible, he was not prepared and was too indecisive to realize them (Hunt, 1987; Kaufman, 1993; Rosati, 1994; Vavrina, 1994; Smith, 1994).

Second, on the domestic political level, some argue that Carter did not accomplish his mission, due mainly to US domestic political restraints, such as public opinion and bureaucratic politics. These arguments emphasize that Carter failed to implement his foreign policy not because his projects were too ambitious or he was incompetent, but because the US domestic political system prevented him from achieving his policy goals (Skidmore, 1996; Kaufman, 1998; Katz, 2000).

Third, on the international level, some argue that international factors rather than his personality or US domestic restrictions considerably curbed him. According to the logic of this school, international circumstances prevented Carter from putting his foreign policy into action, as the invasion by the Soviets of Afghanistan and the Iran hostage incident were the main obstacles to Carter’s policy. (Smith, 1986). In sum, the negative perspectives of Carter’s foreign policy share the idea that Carter’s foreign policy was a failure, although based on different grounds.

However, recently a more positive appraisal of Carter’s foreign policy has emerged. These new approaches maintain that it is too harsh and simplistic to say that Carter’ foreign policies were a total failure or a disaster and argue that Carter’s foreign policy, contrary to conventional wisdom, was feasible, consistent, and effective (Jones 1988; Hargrove, 1988; Dumbrell, 1995, Morris 1996; Hogue 1997; Walker, Schafer, and Young, 1998; Schmitz and Walker, 2004).

For example, Douglas Brinkley argues that Carter’s foreign policy was highly successful, as “Carter’s human rights policy gave the United States moral credibility around the world.” He concludes that it has allowed “Carter to become a highly respected international statesman and the most successful ex-president” (Brinkley, 1996: 505-29). Robert Strong also argues that Carter’s foreign policy was consistent and that he was an “active, intelligent, and sincere individual in command of a complicate foreign policy agenda” (Strong, 2000: 274-5).

With regard to Carter’s policy toward the Korean peninsula, there are different appraisals that are parallel to the assessments to Carter’s foreign policy in general. Some argue that Carter’s policy was inconsistent and ineffective, while others contend that his policy was vital, timely, and even productive. Critics, for instance, argue that Carter could not implement his human rights diplomacy into his South Korea policy in a consistent manner, due mainly to the security concerns coming from North Korea (Brown and McLean, 1979: 255-280; Mower, 1987, 137-144; Lee, 1993; Lee and Chun 1990, Katsiaficas, 2006), while advocates argue that his critics’ claims are unfair considering the complex historical context of South Korea (Fowler 1999; Park 2007 and 2009).

However, most studies of Carter’s foreign policy toward the Korean Peninsula during his presidency have not seriously considered the complicated political context of South Korea and its ultimate impact on South Korea’s security, political, and cultural developments. Most existing studies have also not included Carter’s post-presidency efforts towards Korea’s security, peace, and human rights. We will examine Carter’s achievements in preserving security on the Korean Peninsula by highlighting his historic deal with Kim Il Sung in 1994 and his efforts to advance North Korean human rights through his several visits to Pyongyang.

**III. Carter’s Korea Policy during his Presidency**

This section investigates Carter’s two crucial policies on South Korea during his term of office and assesses their impact on South Korean politics and the democracy movement: withdrawal of American ground troops and human rights diplomacy. These two interrelated policies created divisions within the Park Chung Hee regime and provided ammunition for anti-Park groups. Carter’s South Korea policy thus not only contributed to the collapse of the prolonged dictatorship there, but also left crucial legacies for the South Korean democracy movement.

1. Troop Withdrawal Plan

Carter’s policy to withdraw American troops from South Korea has been generally regarded as a failure. Indeed, his withdrawal plan was not implemented: only one combat battalion of 674 ground troops returned to the United States. In return, twelve air force F-4 fighters and 900 crews were newly assigned to South Korea. (Oberdorfer, 1997: 108) Therefore, critics argue that his unrealistic plan only created confusion in US foreign policy and heightened security concerns. These criticisms against Carter’s troop withdrawal policy are legitimate when we consider its impact on US foreign policy makers. They were indeed confused and worried. Most top policymakers and military forces made desperate efforts to persuade Carter to drop the plan. However, the fact that the policy aroused confusion and concern does not necessarily mean that it had a negative impact on US foreign relations. The evaluation can be varied depending on where the emphasis is placed. Especially when we consider the impact of the plan on Korea, the assessment can be changed. By surveying the two and a half years’ process of the withdrawal program, we will appraise how it affected South Korean politics.

The plan to withdraw US troops from South Korea was already raised by President Richard Nixon, who indeed implemented the plan by bringing the Seventh Infantry Division back to the United States in 1971. However, the troop withdrawal issue temporarily sank out of sight during the administration of President Gerald Ford, who embraced a security-first policy on Korea. Carter brought this issue up again in his Chicago presidential campaign speech on June 23, 1976. (Kim, 2011: 466) He was basically pessimistic about the stationing of US troops overseas. When he was running for the presidency, the general climate of public opinion, affected by the failure in Vietnam, was averse to US military involvement abroad. Carter was impressed by the result of an opinion poll claiming that 65 percent of Americans would oppose US involvement in Korea even when North Korea invaded the South. After entering the White House, Korea policy was one of the top fifteen items to review and make decisions about. The review of troop withdrawal from South Korea was, however, not about whether or not to do so, but about how. As early as February 15, 1977, Carter notified Park that the United States was considering the troop withdrawal issue. President Park sent foreign minister Park Dong Jin to Carter, only to find that Carter had already made up his mind. (Oberdorfer, 1997: 86-88)

Carter’s determined will to withdraw troops from South Korea perplexed most government officials. Some, including most field commanders, raised critical voices against the plan, but others adopted a strategy of delay. The administration was also divided, though voices favorable to the plan were much less apparent. However, as early as May 1977, Carter announced the withdrawal plan, in response to which, Park demanded financial compensation. While this required the approval of the congress, the Koreagate scandal and Korean human rights problems lowered the chances of congress giving its support. (Oberdorfer, 1997: 89~94)

A blow to the troop withdrawal plan was a report claiming that North Korean military strength was much greater than previously assumed in mid-1978. Carter’s plan was becoming more and more isolated before the Iran crisis further narrowed Carter’s ground. He finally authorized a new review of Korea policy in January 22, 1979. He was also recommended by his aids to visit South Korea and reluctantly accepted it. During his visit to Korea, Carter was confronted not only with Park’s strong resistance to the troop withdrawal but also his associates’ attempt to dissuade him from his plan. The whole process surrounding the troop withdrawal plan concluded when the Carter administration finally declared the postponement of the plan until 1981. (Oberdorfer, 1997: 101-106)

The troop withdrawal plan, therefore, appears to be a failure. Considering US security and strategic interests in Korea, the plan was hard to implement. Therefore, its evaluation should better consider the results that the debates on the plan brought forth rather than the plan itself. Despite the seemingly failure of the plan, it gave serious security concerns to Park. The plan, together with human rights diplomacy, thus seriously threatened the unity of the Park regime. Furthermore, the troop withdrawal issue, often linked with the human rights issue, was used as leverage for improving South Korean human rights. In particular when he was about to give up the withdrawal plan, Carter brought up South Korean human rights problems more aggressively.

B. Human Rights Diplomacy

Another no less important issue to consider is human rights diplomacy, the most crucial of President Carter’s agendas. This agenda was, however, not Carter’s invention: it was essentially Jeffersonian and received worldwide support in the UN Charter in 1945. During the early and mid-1970s, human rights issue was raised by various NGOs including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Christian churches. Progressive democrats, such as Donald M. Fraser and Tom Harkin, in the Congress also strongly supported the issue.

It was Carter, however, who made it a crucial policy item of US foreign relations. While human rights diplomacy can be regarded as a radical shift from previous Cold War policy based on realism, history shows us that its implementation was not that simple: even the seemingly idealistic and moralistic policy had to operate in reality and was thus often hampered by security concerns. There were also claims that human rights and US security were mutually complementary. For example, Jerome A. Cohen argued that US support for Park’s authoritarian rule and its silence on his political suppression would ultimately make South Korea vulnerable to communist attack. (Kim, 2011: 462) As with troop withdrawal policy, however, the human rights agenda encountered resistance from “realistic” policymakers who were concerned more about its potential damage to US Cold War policy.

The human rights policy on Korea was designed independently of the troop withdrawal plan, but those two issues could not be separated. The origin of conflict between the United States and South Korea over human rights was US troop withdrawal in 1971 and Park’s announcement of the *Yushin* constitution in October 1972. When the Nixon administration began to withdraw the Seventh Infantry Division in 1971, Park responded by launching the infamous *Yushin* system in which power was monopolized by Park Chung Hee and his Democratic Republican Party. As Park’s control of society became more and more tight, various groups began to resist the regime. From the spring of 1974, Korean student activists, church leaders, journalists, and opposition party leaders began fiercely protesting against the dictatorial regime, which in turn, severely suppressed them. In this process of suppression, the regime seriously violated human rights. (Kim, 2011: 459-461)

The United States began to pay attention to this human rights violation, however, it was various American NGOs, including Reverend Pharis J. Harvey’s North American Coalition for Human Rights in Korea, Amnesty International, Asia Watch, and International Human Rights Law Group, who first raised their voices against Park’s human rights suppression in South Korea. American Presbyterian and United Methodist churches were also a source of support for the South Korean democracy movement against the Park regime. (Kim, 2011: 461-462) These Christian churches helped South Korean anti-Park activists to use human rights discourses in their battle against the regime. (Snyder, 2013; *Hanguk gidokkyo gyohoi hyeopuihoi ingwon wiwonhoi* [National Council of Churches in Korea, Human Rights Commission], 1987 vol. 1: 30-41) It was, however, not until the Carter’s presidency that these movements became fully developed enough to influence South Korea. (Kim and Vogel, 2011: 21)

In addition to these various human rights activist groups and church organizations, the American congress was another crucial actor in the human rights battle between the United States and South Korea. Some progressive representatives of the Democratic Party, including Donald M. Fraser, Tom Harkin, and Walter Mondale, led a series of hearings on human rights in South Korea in 1974 and 1975.[[1]](#footnote-1) Based on the findings of the hearings, a group of Democratic Party congressmen, with the support of US human rights lawyers and church leaders, kept raising human rights issues of the Park regime. They warned that Park’s authoritarian rule would not only hurt South Korean democracy but also might lead to another war in Korea. The Ford government, however, put more emphasis on stability than on human rights in Korea and thus continued to support the Park regime. (Kim, 2011: 462-265)

Entering the White House, Carter attempted to radically shift the previous security-focused foreign policy by emphasizing human rights as a basic principle of US diplomacy. Carter created the human rights bureau within the State Department and appointed Patricia Derian as assistant secretary of state for human rights and humanitarian affairs. However, the human rights bureau often conflicted with regional bureaus in the State Department and the Department of Defense. In order to solve these conflicts, Carter established the Interagency Group on Human Rights and Foreign Assistance, known as the Christopher Group. (Kim, 2011: 473)

Carter’s commitment to human rights not only shaped US foreign policy but also animated the human rights activities of NGOs, churches, and congress gained momentum. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch raised their voices about South Korean human rights issues under the Carter administration and a transnational coalition was formed between American and South Korean Christian human rights organizations. Progressive congressmen made South Korean human rights problems prominent on the agenda by linking them with military aid.

It is an ironic, however, that these various human rights advocates animated by Carter’s policy, in turn, became obstacles to the policy: their different strategies prevented Carter’s active and endless pursuit of his policy. While claiming that the human rights issue should be linked to the troop withdrawal, Progressive congressman like Fraser wanted to use the troop withdrawal agenda as leverage for the improvement of human rights in South Korea. The newly established human rights bureau tried to link human rights agenda with aid program, while the Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance opposed the linking of the two. However, Carter, who had already decided on troop withdrawal from South Korea even before his victory in the election, instead pursued the two issues separately. (Kim, 471-473)

Despite these difficulties, Carter’s human rights diplomacy for South Korea produced some fruit. The statement announced after the summit between Carter and Park in 1979 included human rights issues, and accordingly Park released 86 political prisoners and allowed the visit to the United States of a prominent anti-regime activist, Lee Tae-young. The Carter administration’s tough response to the YH Incident and the *buma* pro-democratic demonstrations led the Park regime to be cautious so as not to make the situation worse. (Park, 2009: 219 – 222)

Then, was the Carter’s human rights policy on South Korea successful? A general opinion regarding this question has been negative. (Hoffman, 1977-78; Kirkpatrick, 1979; Hunt, 1987; Kaufman, 1993; Rosati, 1994; Vavrina, 1994; Smith, 1994) Many argue that Carter’s human rights diplomacy was mostly focused on Latin America and was not strongly implemented in such strategically crucial nations as Korea and Iran. Carter’s policy thus ended in anticlimax without producing any meaningful changes there. Even scholars who tried to challenge this negative evaluation by demonstrating his determination and coherence on the human rights policy do not claim success for the policy. (Jones, 1988; Hargrove, 1988) Studies focusing specifically on Carter’s South Korea policy have also taken a similar negative position. They argue that Carter’s policy was limited by realistic considerations of South Korea’s importance as a Cold War front. (Lee, 1993, 2007; Kim, 1999) However, a recent study shows that Carter tried to pursue coherent and determined human rights diplomacy in South Korea and his visit to Seoul was the culmination of the policy that had been already in progress. (Park, 2007, 2009)

An assessment of Carter’s human rights diplomacy should not be based on a simple comparison of target countries without considering the different historical context of each counterpart nation and varying degrees of leverage that the United States had there. Furthermore, the evaluation should not narrowly focus on whether Carter’s specific policy was achieved by measuring it according to improvement in South Korean human rights. In order to more properly appraise Carter’s human rights diplomacy, we should expand our view and consider various American and Korean actors involved in the South Korean human rights issues as well as the longer-term effect of the policy.

First of all, there were clear obstacles to pursuing human rights diplomacy in Korea. As shown in the strong resistance within the US government and congress in regard to the troop withdrawal plan, there were widespread concerns for US security among their policymakers. Thus Carter had to dispel these concerns in order to carry out his moral diplomacy. Park’s resistance was determined and strategic: in response to the America’s troop withdrawal plan, he not only argued against it but also asked for compensation for the withdrawal. This compensation required the approval of congress and thus made the troop withdrawal issue more complicated. In response to the human rights issue, Park used both hard and moderate strategies: while releasing a limited number of the arrested anti-regime activists, he further tightened controls over the people. These difficulties made Carter’s human rights diplomacy more controversial and less effective. It was ultimately not successful in fundamentally changing Park’s attitudes and policy toward human rights issues. However, these limitations were structural when we consider the peculiar security interests of the United States in South Korea. Any evaluation thus should consider how Carter tried to overcome these limitations and what implications the attempts had on South Korea.

As mentioned above, Carter’s human rights diplomacy encouraged various human rights advocates to operate more actively. Various activities by these diverse groups affected South Korean human rights in a variety of ways through different agencies. Human rights NGOs in the United States not only disseminated information about Korean human rights problems throughout the world but also directly supported Korean human rights groups’ protests against the Park regime. (Cmiel, 1999: 1237-1238) These NGOs also put pressure on congressmen to discuss the issue. Congress thus pushed Carter further to pursue the issue more adamantly by linking the issue with troop withdrawal. While being reluctant to link the two issues at first, Carter later strategically used troop withdrawal issue to persuade Park to improve South Korean human rights. US Christian churches also helped Korean Christian human rights organizations shape strategies and provided financial aid.

Carter’s bringing up of Korean human rights problems also inspired South Korean anti-regime movements. Indeed, after Carter’s visit to Korea, anti-regime protests became more wide spread and gained support from the public. Opposition party leaders, including Kim Young Sam, were also encouraged by the Carter administration’s aggressive human rights diplomacy and increased their attacks on the Park regime. (Park, 2009: 219 - 221)

Another, more important impact of Carter’s human rights diplomacy was that it shook not only Park himself but also his supporters. America’s raising of human rights issues, as well as the troop withdrawal plan, caused great concerns among South Korean political leaders. In searching for best way to respond to the US attempt, South Korean policymakers were divided. The fact that Park was ultimately assassinated by one of his closest associates shows that Park’s regime collapsed due to internal conflict, in which Carter’s policy unquestionably played a part.

**IV. The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter after his Presidency**

Even after his presidency, Jimmy Carter’s efforts in support of human rights and peace have continued. Carter’s general activities after his presidency were conducted mainly by the Carter Center, through which he tried to promote democracy, advance human rights, and improve health and poverty all over the world. His incessant efforts for peace and human rights have also continued on the Korean Peninsula. He actively engaged in Korean security and human rights issues, individually as well as collectively. For example, in April 1999, through the Carter Center, President Carter “joined several relief and development agencies to undertake a pilot initiative to boost potato production and improve food security in North Korea” (Carter Center, 2013).

A. Jimmy Carter’s Unfinished Presidency for Peace

His foreign policy efforts for peace and security with particular regard to the Korean Peninsula were highlighted in 1994, when the North Korean nuclear crisis reached its peak as he dramatically brokered the deal with Kim Il Sung and defused the crisis. Although the first nuclear crisis had been developing for a while, it culminated in 1994, when North Korea announced its withdrawal from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), expelled the IAEA’s inspectors, and threatened to reprocess its spent nuclear fuel into plutonium. In response, the Clinton administration was even considering precision air strikes against Yongbyon, the suspicious nuclear site of North Korea. President Clinton was increasing US military forces in South Korea and US citizens resident in South Korea were ordered to be prepared to flee. Although the South Korea government tried to calm the public, South Koreans stockpiled basic necessities. The same day that Carter entered North Korea, South Korea held the largest nationwide civil defense exercise in years. In a word, the Korean Peninsula was on the verge of war (Creekmore, 2006: xiii; also, Sigal 1999; Oberdorfer, 2002; Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci, 2004; Lee, 2006).

Against this backdrop, Carter went to North Korea by crossing the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the two Koreas, which had been established as a neutral unarmed area between South Korea and North Korea when the Armistice Agreement was made in 1953. Carter was the first American to make the direct trip from South Korea to North Korea crossing the DMZ since the Agreement (Carter 2004, 128). By this he hoped to jump-start a negotiation process between the United States and North Korea that would diplomatically resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. He was strongly convinced that a devastating war would break out on the Korean Peninsula once again unless he succeeded. Carter, however, had to overcome difficulties within and outside of the United States as Clinton was reluctant to approve his trip to North Korea and President Kim Young Sam of South Korea complained that Carter’s trip would be a mistake. Critics charged Carter with aggravating the crisis through his intervention and even Carter himself thought that his involvement would be too late. Nevertheless, he decided to go to Pyongyang because he had to do his best to prevent a possible war on the Korean Peninsula (Creekmore, 2006: xii-viii).

Cater had been invited by Pyongyang for several years as North Korea thought of Carter as a person whom they could trust. According to Carter, Kim Il Sung sent him “a steady stream of invitations and personal entreaties to come to Pyongyang,” and in the light of these invitations, he finally decided to travel to North Korea. Although he “had always refrained from going to a troubled area of the world without approval from the White House or State Department,” he could not get approval this time. So he “wrote President Clinton a letter and told him that [he] had decided to go to North Korea” (PBS, 2003).

To Clinton, “the Carter mission was a gamble,” because “If he freelanced, he could always be disowned, but not without political repercussions.” Furthermore, “even if he succeeded, the administration would be open to criticism by congressional Republicans and South Koreans who disparaged Carter’s willingness to take risks for peace.” On the other hand, “turning down the former president was also risky, especially if it came to be portrayed as a missed opportunity to avoid war.” President Clinton, therefore, reluctantly approved Carter’s trip to Pyongyang (Sigal, 1997).

When Carter arrived, Kim Il Sung treated him “with great deference.” Furthermore, Kim “was completely truthful” with Carter. (PBS, 2003) After two days of meetings with Kim Il Sung, furthermore, Carter finally made an agreement to freeze North Korea’s nuclear program in exchange for the resumption of a dialogue with the United States. This breakthrough dramatically resulted in the 1994 Geneva Agreement which successfully froze North Korea’s nuclear developments. This, however, would be abandoned in 2002 during the Bush administration.

Carter was not given any authority by the US government and he was not a delegate or a special envoy representing them. He thus went to North Korea and met with Kim Il Sung only on behalf of the Carter Center (PBS 2003). But Carter thought that someone had to try to talk with Kim Il Sung, even if he was a dictator and enemy, to resolve the crisis peacefully without resorting to war. He said,

“I have sometimes been criticized for dealing with ‘tyrants’ and accused of coddling ‘miscreants.’ To the question of whether to negotiate with such a person, my answer is simple. We live in an imperfect world. If that person holds the power to do harm or to prevent it, I would seriously negotiate with him, not out of fear or naivete, but from conviction that such an approach will maximize the chances of alleviating or preventing the problem” (Creekmore, 2006: xxv).

He was keenly aware of the criticisms that his trip would not be successful or become an appeasement at best. He was also criticized as ‘being unknowledgeable about North Korea, naïve, and gullible.’ But he decided to go because he believed that war was the worse violator of human rights to be avoided at any cost. In his Nobel Peace Prize address in 2002, he noted that “war may sometimes be a necessary evil, but no matter how necessary, it is always evil” (Creekmore, 2006: xv).

Twelve years after the visit, Carter said that although, in 1994, the world “was marching forward a war that was neither wanted nor necessary… No top official in Washington was willing to meet one-on-one with Kim Il Sung.” In Carter’s view, however, “someone had to determine firsthand whether Kim Il Sung wanted conflict or preferred to resolve the serious nuclear crisis diplomatically.” Since Carter “had a long-standing invitation to visit North Korea and consult with him,” he finally decided to go. Although Carter “was acutely aware of Washington’s reservations” and knew that his “failure would bring sharp and enduring condemnation,” he “hoped that Kim Il Sung was looking for a way to resolve the crisis peacefully, and believed that his views should be explored before the United States risked a dangerous and costly war” (Carter, 2006: xxi-xxii).

Carter went on to say that, “My intervention into the North Korean nuclear crisis of 1994 reflected my basic beliefs about existing and potential conflicts and how third party mediation can sometimes help prevent or resolve such confrontation.” Carter believed that “where both sides see—or can be helped to see—real value in avoiding or ending violent confrontation but do not know how to achieve this goal, then an outside mediator may be able to help them break through their own intolerance and ignorance of the other’s views, create an atmosphere of mutual respect, and frame a final settlement that protects the fundamental interests of each” (Carter, 2006: xxiii).

 Carter confessed that he learned a lesson from his role as a mediator between Israel and Egypt in 1978 when he was president. Accoriding to Carter:

“I underwent a trial by fire in conflict mediation while serving as president of the United States. For thirteen days in October 1978, I cajoled and pressed Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Isreal and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt to end their confrontation and negotiate a peaceful resolution of their three-decade-long state of war. Since the two disputants could not constructively engage in face-to-face consultations, I went back and forth between the two leaders and their advisers, seeking first to understand fully their countries’ basic interests and then to draft and sell them on compromise language that preserved the interests of both sides. I think Begin and Sadat understood that I respected each of them, that I was committed to helping them frame a mutually acceptable settlement, and that I attached great importance to the subject since I gave it my primary attention, despite other world demands, for almost two weeks. As a result of the 1978 Camp David Accord and the peace treaty that followed between the two countries, Israel withdrew from the occupied Sinai, and the two countries established diplomatic relations. Not a word of this peace treaty has been violated since then” (Carter, 2006: xxiii-xxiv).

As Creekmore noted, Carter’s intervention in the 1994 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula “probably has been his most momentous and certainly his most high-profile post-presidential endeavor” (Creekmore, 2006: 281). In retrospect, Carter also said, “Rosalynn and I have visited numerous foreign nations for projects of The Carter Center, but perhaps the most interesting and significant was our attempt to prevent a possible catastrophic war on the Korean Peninsula” (Carter, 2004: 127).

Despite the criticism that he undertook the business unprepared, in fact, Carter was well prepared. According to Creekmore, “Carter prepared himself thoroughly, ensuring that he fully understood both the technical complexities of the nuclear issues and the political imperatives of the involved nations.” He was well aware of the technical aspects of the North Korean nuclear issue, because of his training in nuclear engineering during his service as a naval officer. In addition, Carter was a skillful mediator as evidenced by the fact of his role in fashioning the Camp David Accord in 1978 between Israel and Egypt. Before he left the United States, he drafted a paper with “a potential settlement that he believed met the necessary conditions of each side, and he had devised talking points to sell his proposed settlement.” The fact that his paper prepared for the meeting finally turned out to be remarkably close to the deal to which Kim Il Sung agreed clearly shows that how well he had been prepared for the task (Creekmore, 20006: 283-5).

Carter’s determination to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue in 1994 evidently brought about a negotiated settlement between the United States and North Korea, probably prevented a war on the Korean Peninsula, and ultimately contributed to peace and stability in the East Asian region. His achievements not only defused the 1994 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, but also gave a precious lesson to us regarding US policy toward North Korea.

B. Jimmy Carter’s Unfinished Presidency for Human Rights

In August 2010, Carter went to Pyongyang once again to free Aijalon Mahli Gomes, an American English teacher in South Korea, who was sentenced to eight years in prison and fined $700,000 by a North Korean court for entering the country illegally. Although the Obama administration said the rescue mission would be “humanitarian,” it assumed “special significance in view of Carter’s success in defusing the first Korean nuclear crisis more than 16 years ago when he met with North Korea’s ‘Great Leader’ Kim Il-sung” (Kirk, 2010).

Carter must have wanted to follow in the footsteps of Bill Clinton, who went to Pyongyang in August of 2009 to rescue Laura Ling and Euna Lee, American journalists who had been arrested by North Korean soldiers for trespassing in North Korea while filming a documentary around the China-North Korea border. But this time again, Carter went to Pyongyang not as a representative of the US government, but as a private citizen, because the Obama administration did not want to give an impression that Carter’s visit was a change of US policy. According to Paik Hak-soon, however, Carter’s visit was “particularly symbolic in view of his very important role in solving the first nuclear crisis in 1994” (Kirk, 2010).

Han Park, who played an important role both in Carter’s 1994 trip and in this trip, also placed a premium on Carter’s trip, especially at a time when the relationship between the two countries had been at the lowest point. Against this background, Pyongyang had been looking forward to Carter’s visit for some time. According to him, despite the denial of the US government, “the release of Gomes was actually a secondary reason for Carter’s visit, the first being restarting talks with the United States.” Park also said that “the release was not the North Korean purpose… They wanted to have a much more substantive discussion when the official line is seemingly blocked” (Labott, 2010).

The Obama administration was going to send Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, but Pyongyang chose Carter over the two (Rogin, 2010). It appears that Carter was aware that North Korea could use him for propaganda purposes. But he decided to go to Pyongyang for his own purposes: to free Gomes, to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula, and to pave the way for a breakthrough in US-North Korea relations. Carter came back to the United States with Gomes, who had been granted amnesty and released by Kim Jong Il at his request.

During his stay in Pyongyang, however, Carter did not meet with Kim Jong Il, because Kim left for China the same day that Carter arrived at Pyongyang. Although Kim’s leaving without meeting Carter would be ‘a notable breach of diplomatic etiquette,’ especially considering the fact that Carter paid a visit to Pyongyang at Kim’s request, Carter already knew that he would not meet with Kim Jong Il personally. Instead, Carter was met with Kim Yong-nam, the head of the North Korean People’s Assembly, and Kim Kye-gwan, the vice foreign minister and chief negotiator for North Korea in the Six-Party Talks. Both of them had also participated in Carter’s negotiations with Kim Il Sung in 1994 (Carter, 2010).

In April, 2011, Carter went to Pyongyang, for the third time, “with a to-do list that includes breaking the long impasse over the nation’s nuclear program, nudging the regime forward on human rights and possibly securing the release of an imprisoned US citizen” (Demick, 2011). On this trip, President Carter was accompanied by former leaders from Europe, President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, former Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway, and former President Mary Robinson of Ireland. All four were members of The Elders, an independent group of world leaders founded by former South African President Nelson Mandela. Although many regarded this trip as similar to his 1994 trip, he clearly said that his primary concern was humanitarian. Former Irish President Mary Robinson also said that “we believe that it is very, very important to ensure that women and children and the elderly do not suffer because of a political situation” (Demick, 2011).

The State Department once again said that Carter’s trip was ‘a private journey’ and that he was “not acting as an American envoy” (McDonald, 2011). Carter and the group were hoping to meet with Kim Jong Il, but their wish was never fulfilled. Instead, they met with senior foreign and military officials of North Korea. As in 2010 when Carter visited Pyongyang to free Aijalon Mahli Gomes, Carter also had a humanitarian rescue mission to release Jun Young-su, a Korean-American businessman, who had been taken into custody in connection with illegal religious activities in North Korea. But this time, Carter could not return with Jun, although he and the group had signed an appeal for Jun’s release on humanitarian grounds. Carter explained that “Mr. Jun had not been officially charged by the authorities, a status that complicated his release (McDonald, 2011).

After the visit to North Korea, Carter stridently criticized both South Korea and the United States for their refusal to send humanitarian assistance to North Korea, saying their deliberate withholding of food aid amounted to ‘a human rights violation.’ Former Irish President Mary Robinson also criticized it stating that the withholding of “American and South Korean food shipments had aggravated the already-dire situation, which had become ‘a matter of life-and-death urgency’” (McDonald, 2011).

However, critics claimed that Carter had been silent on North Korean human rights abuses and his approach threatened to undermine official US policy toward North Korea (Klingner, 2011). It is true that Carter did not directly address North Korean human right issues, either in North Korea or in the United States. But it was not because he ignored North Korea’s human rights issues, but because he thought it would not help improve them in a radical manner. Carter also paid attention to economic and social human rights issues in North Korea. In his view, the United States was also violating human rights by withholding food aid for North Korea for political reasons (McDonald, 2011). It was his belief that North Korea’s human rights issue could not be solved by pressuring the nation and that a more sophisticated way should be designed and applied to solve the problem which he felt he was contributing. Although his approach did not always go hand in hand with official US human rights policy toward North Korea, especially considering the fact the US policy did not produce any positive results in North Korea, it is unfair to say that Carter undermined US human rights policy toward North Korea or that Carter’s approach aggravated the human rights of North Korea.

Why did Carter have privileged access to North Korea? Carter campaigned to withdraw US troops as well as nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula, when he was a candidate for the US presidency in 1975. Although he, in the end, could not put these policies into practices, due to strong opposition from both inside and outside the United States, his withdrawal plans left deep impression on Kim Il Sung. Throughout the Cold War, Kim had repeatedly stated that one of his central goals was “the removal of all American troops from the Korean peninsula.” In November 1976, thus, when Carter won the presidential election, “Kim wrote directly to the president-elect in Plains, asking to establish immediate contact between Pyongyang and Washington, D.C. On the eve of Carter’s inauguration, Kim Il Sung, eager to bond with Carter, noticeably softened his normally fierce anti-American rhetoric, hoping to initiate a rapprochement” (Brinkley, 1998: 389-90).

During his presidency, Carter also accepted communiqués from Kim, lifted the US ban on travel to North Korea, and for the first time invited North Korea’s UN representative to an official US reception. In response, Kim sent friendly letters to President Carter. At the time, Carter disliked Park Chung Hee, who had taken power by military coup, considering him to be arrogant and immoral. He also sought a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and a unified Korea as an ultimate goal of his Korea policy. Considering these factors, it is no wonder that Kim publicly referred to Carter as ‘a man of justice’ (Brinkley, 1998, 390). Even after his presidency, Carter continuously devoted himself to promoting democracy and human rights all over the world and improving the Third World’s health and poverty problems. The North Korean leaders must have been greatly impressed by such efforts and regarded him as a sincere and honest mediator.

**V. Conclusion**

While evaluation on Carter’s diplomacy has been negative, recent scholars have shed more positive light on it. Both the traditionalist and revisionist studies, however, have mostly focused on its implications on U.S. interests in the narrow context of the Cold War. This paper, however, tried to overcome these limits by looking at how Carter’s policy affected foreign nations (the Two Koreas) in the medium and long term. Instead of assessing if Carter’s troop withdrawal and human rights diplomacy were successfully implemented or not, therefore, we have explored the various ramifications of his policy for diverse Korean groups including the Park regime, oppositional party leaders, and anti-Park democracy activists. By investigating how he contributed to solving various North Korea related issues even after his presidency, this paper further demonstrates his long-term influence on Korean peninsula.

While providing some positive light on Carter’s policy and activities, however, this case study does not attempt to directly be involved in the debate about whether Carter’s policy was successful or not. Carter’s policy had both success and failure and measure of success can be altered by where we put emphasis. This dichotomous evaluation also risks paying less attention to the diverse and sometimes contradictory implications of his policies. Our paper thus aims at tracing various implications of Carter’s policy and activities by focusing one specific case study.

Carter’s South Korea policy during his presidency had two levels of ramifications. First, South Korea’s anti-Park movement was not only inspired by Carter’s human rights diplomacy but also supported by various American human rights NGOs. Moreover, Carter’s insistence on troop withdrawal and raising South Korean human rights issues were a serious source of security concerns of the Park regime. These challenges from two sides, one from below and another from outside, created serious divisions within the regime. And this division was one of the crucial causes of the regime’s collapse. Even after the Park era, human rights continued to be an important agenda of the Koran democracy movement. His post-presidency, in the short run, helped both Koreas overcome the crisis of war and created a chance for the United States and North Korea to communicate. His activities also opened a possibility of establishment of a peace regime and achievement of denuclearization in the Korean peninsula through conversation and negotiation.

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