

# A Diachronic Study of the Image Construction of U.S Forces Korea after the Cold War



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**Abstract:** This study examines how U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) has been represented in *The Chosun Ilbo* after the Cold War. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis (SCDA), it develops a media image-construction framework that integrates transitivity analysis and appraisal theory. A corpus of 2,043 news reports published between 1992 and 2023 was constructed, and 742 reports were selected for clause-level annotation. The findings show that the image of USFK changed across seven interrelated dimensions: South Korean security, military deployment, stationing costs, regional peace, relations with the United States, military capability, and civil-military relations. USFK is repeatedly represented as both a stabilizing security force and a source of political, financial, and social tension. The reports construct this ambivalent image through material processes, elite quotation, relational attribution, mental-process representation, and explicit attitudinal evaluation. The study demonstrates the usefulness of corpus-assisted functional discourse analysis for examining the other-construction of overseas military forces.

**Keywords:** U.S. Forces Korea, media image construction, systemic functional linguistics, transitivity, appraisal theory

## 1. Introduction

The Korean Peninsula has long been one of the most sensitive strategic spaces in Northeast Asia. It lies at the intersection of the interests of China, the United States, Japan, and Russia, and its security order has been shaped by both Cold War legacies and post-Cold War alliance restructuring. In this geopolitical environment, USFK has functioned not only as an American military presence but also as a symbolic institution of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Since the end of the Second World War, USFK has been associated with deterrence, South Korean defense, regional stability, and U.S. strategic projection in the Asia-Pacific region. Its transformation has therefore affected the security interests of surrounding states and the public perception of the ROK-U.S. alliance (Lv & Cen, 2022).

After the Cold War, the role of USFK became more complex. The disappearance of the Soviet threat encouraged the United States to review its overseas deployments, while the first North Korean nuclear crisis interrupted projected troop reductions.

Later, the South Korean Sunshine Policy, the debate over the strategic flexibility of USFK, North Korea's nuclear and missile tests, the PyeongChang Olympic diplomacy, inter-Korean summits, and U.S.-North Korean meetings all changed the context in which USFK was discussed. As a result, USFK has been alternately described as a security guarantor, an expeditionary force, a financial burden, a symbol of U.S. influence, and a source of friction with local communities (Xia & Luo 2015).

A review of existing studies shows that current research on military image has addressed a wide range of issues (van Dijk 2005; Mark 2015; Liang & Tan 2011; Li & Liang 2021). A small number of studies have also examined the image of military bases (O'Shea 2019; Liu & Li 2022), while research on the image of foreign militaries has mainly focused on the image of the U.S. military (Brown 2012; Fransen 2019; Zhang & Gong 2017; Qu et al. 2020).

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Discourse studies on the image construction of the U.S. military mostly concentrate on its “self-construction” (Apostel 2011; Parrott 2019; Wang 2019; Hu 2018), with insufficient attention paid to the “other-construction” of the U.S. military image. Studies on the image construction of U.S. overseas military presence and the U.S. Forces Korea have also largely examined the “self-construction” of military presence from the perspective of international politics (Vine 2015; Chang & Miao 2023). Their research directions mainly involve qualitative studies of specific historical or practical issues, such as historical development (Qi & Wang 2009; Yan & Deng 2019; Kihoon 2021), social movements (Giyong 2008; Xu 2017), environmental pollution (Namseok 2020), base relocation (Jiwon 2019), and future development predictions (Inseok 2021). However, there remains a lack of qualitative discourse analysis from a linguistic perspective and quantitative analysis of image “other-construction” based on a diachronic large-scale corpus. This study therefore asks two questions:

(1) First, how can a discourse analysis framework for media-based military image construction be established from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics?

(2) Second, what diachronic changes can be identified in the image of USFK in *The Chosun Ilbo* coverage after the Cold War?

## 2. Main Content

### 2.1. Analytical framework

van Dijk (2014) introduced cognition into critical discourse analysis and proposed socio-cognitive discourse analysis, or the “discourse-cognition-society triangle.” SCDA views socially shared knowledge, ideologies, and personal mental models as cognitive interfaces between discourse and society. It connects discourse structures with social structures through social cognition and emphasizes shared background knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies in communicative contexts. van Dijk (2016) further argued that social structures shape discourse through language users’ minds. Combining textual, social, and cognitive analysis, SCDA examines discourse at

three levels: textual representation, social cognition, and social practice.

SFL provides the linguistic tools for identifying how such image construction is realized in discourse. Its theory of metafunctions explains how language construes experience, enacts interpersonal relations, and organizes meaning. This study focuses on two systems. The first is transitivity, which belongs to the experiential metafunction. Transitivity classifies clauses into process types such as material, mental, verbal, relational, behavioral, and existential processes, and identifies participants and circumstances associated with these processes (Halliday 1967). Through this system, it is possible to determine whether USFK is represented as an actor, goal, sayer, carrier, value, senser, phenomenon, or other participant role.

The second system is appraisal theory, which extends the interpersonal metafunction. Appraisal Theory focuses on how attitudes are negotiated and readers are aligned at the lexico-grammatical level, involving the expression of attitude, emotional intensity, and value in discourse. This study mainly focuses on the attitude system, including affect, judgement, and appreciation, as well as polarity and explicitness. Affect concerns emotional reactions such as security, fear, confidence, or dissatisfaction. Judgement evaluates human behavior and capacity. Appreciation evaluates things, events, institutions, and processes (Martin & White, 2005).

Based on these theoretical resources, this study constructs an SFL-based media other-construction model of military image (Figure 1). At the micro-textual level, transitivity analysis identifies the social roles assigned to USFK and related actors. Appraisal analysis identifies the attitudinal meanings attached to USFK, its actions, and its consequences. At the socio-cognitive level, these linguistic patterns are interpreted as representations of security dependence, alliance expectation, cost pressure, strategic suspicion, and civil-military tension. At the macro-contextual level, the findings are connected with changing security conditions on the Peninsula and with shifts in U.S. and South Korean alliance politics.

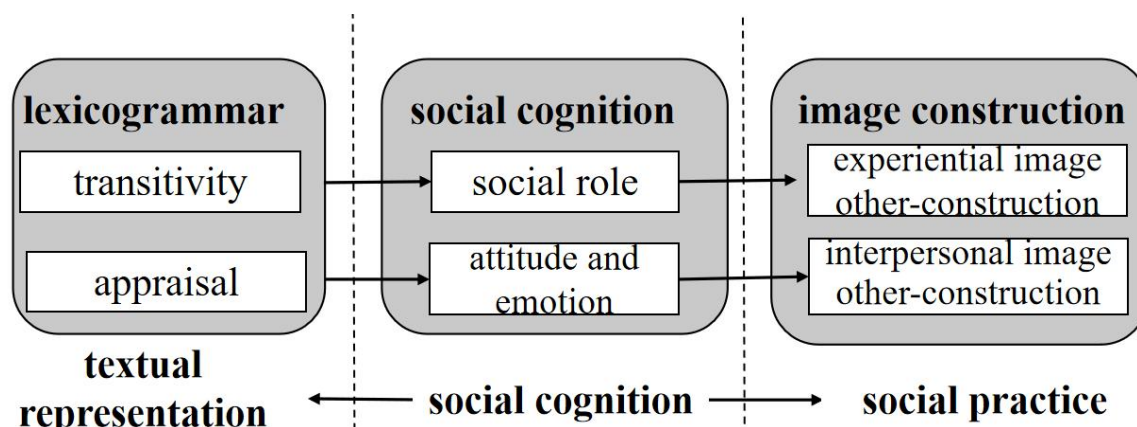


Figure 1. A Media Other-Construction Model of Military Image Based on SFL

## 2.2. Methodology

The corpus was compiled from the English- and Korean-language online archives of *The Chosun Ilbo*, which is one of the most influential newspapers in South Korea. The coverage of USFK provides an important discourse site for observing the other-construction of American forces in a host society. Unlike official military self-image, this media image is produced through the interaction of government voices, alliance politics, public sentiment, regional security discourse, and journalistic evaluation. Reports were collected with the English keyword “USFK” and its Korean equivalent. The time span covers 1 January 1992 to 31 December 2023. Because the English-language service began in April 1999, Korean-language reports were collected for the period from January 1992 to March 1999, while English-language materials were used for the later period. After removing weakly relevant items, the final corpus contained 2,043 news reports and approximately 3.59 million tokens.

For clause-level analysis, 742 reports were selected through stratified sampling. The sampling procedure followed four principles. First, the selected reports had to cover the major topics identified in the whole corpus. Second, the sampling was distributed across time, with each month divided into three ten-day periods. Third, when several topics appeared in the same period, priority was given to the topic with the highest frequency. Fourth, when candidate reports dealt with similar topics, longer reports were selected because they offered more complete discourse contexts.

The whole period was divided into four historical stages. The first stage, 1992-1999, corresponds to the immediate post-Cold War adjustment of U.S. security strategy and debates about troop reductions. The second stage, 1999-2006, covers the Sunshine Policy period, the first inter-Korean summit, and the beginning of the strategic flexibility debate. The third stage, 2007-2018, includes North Korean nuclear and missile tests, base relocation, burden-sharing disputes, and renewed inter-Korean diplomacy. The fourth stage, 2019-2023, follows the breakdown of summit diplomacy, intensified cost-sharing conflicts, and renewed regional strategic competition.

The analysis combined computational corpus processing with manual annotation. Web collection and Python were used to build and clean the corpus. UAM Corpus Tool was used for clause-level annotation of transitivity and appraisal resources. The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, major topics were identified to reveal the agenda of USFK coverage. Second, clauses containing references to USFK and related actors were annotated for transitivity patterns. Third, attitudinal resources were annotated to examine affective, judgemental, and appreciative evaluation. Quantitative patterns were then interpreted qualitatively in relation to historical context.

## 2.3. Findings

The findings show that *The Chosun Ilbo* constructs USFK through two interrelated mechanisms: social role allocation and attitudinal positioning. Transitivity analysis reveals how USFK is located in actions, relations, statements, and

perceptions. Appraisal analysis shows how the newspaper evaluates USFK as useful, necessary, costly, powerful, controversial, or socially problematic. Across the four stages, seven major dimensions of image construction are especially salient.

### (1) Diachronic Changes in the Experiential Image of USFK based on Transitivity Theory

First, USFK's role in South Korean security changes with the Peninsula security environment. In 1992-1999, it is represented as shifting from the main actor in South Korean defense to a supporting force within a changing alliance structure. In 1999-2006, reports emphasize that South Korea still depends heavily on USFK, particularly in relation to North Korea. In 2007-2018, USFK is described as responsible for defending South Korea, but some reports also suggest that its usefulness is being questioned. In 2019-2023, USFK is again foregrounded as an important force for maintaining Peninsula security and deterring North Korea. This diachronic pattern shows that the security image of USFK is not fixed. It rises or weakens according to perceived threat, alliance confidence, and domestic political debate. Representative examples are as follows:

[1] 연합사 군사처 마틴 루소 소령은 “지난 반세기동안 주한미군의 역할이 한국방위에 대한 담보에 그쳤다면 다음 반세기는 한반도 전쟁억제력으로서의 미군의 역할과 미군의 태평양방위를 위한 한국군의 기여가 조화를 이루는 협력의 시대가 돼야 할 것” 이라고 말했다. (1995/9/7)

(Major Martin Russo of the Military Affairs Office of the Combined Forces Command said, “If the role of the U.S. Forces Korea over the past half century was limited to providing a guarantee for South Korea's defense, the next half century should become an era of cooperation in which the U.S. military's role as a deterrent against war on the Korean Peninsula is harmonized with the South Korean military's contribution to the U.S. defense of the Pacific.”)

[2] It appears Koreans want to intentionally disregard this reality, that we need the USFK more than it needs us. (2002/10/21)

[3] But he added, “The presence of the USFK is essential here for the stability of Northeast Asia as well as the Korean Peninsula. (2008/5/2)

[4] If there should be public consensus that the USFK have outlived their usefulness, we have to make steady preparations for their departure. (2008/5/19)

[5] But the Defense Ministry here insisted the priority of the USFK is to defend the South against North Korea. (2022/12/28)

Example [1] contains two material processes. The first presents “the role of USFK” as the Actor and “a guarantee for the defense of South Korea” as the Goal; the second identifies “the contribution of the South Korean military” as the Actor and “coordination” as the Goal. This indicates that USFK's role shifted from directly guaranteeing South Korea's defense before the end of the Cold War to serving as a deterrent against war on the Korean Peninsula in coordination with the South Korean military. Example [2] contains three material-process clauses: “Koreans” as the Actor who “disregard” reality, “we” as the Actor who “need” USFK, and “it” as the Actor in relation to “us.” This contrast suggests that, from a Korean perspective, USFK is more valuable to South Korea than to the United States. Example [3] is a relational process in which “The presence of the USFK” is the Carrier and “essential” is the Attribute, emphasizing its regional importance. Example [4] uses “public consensus” to suggest that USFK may have lost its usefulness. In Example [5], “the Defense Ministry” as the Sayer reinforces that USFK's priority is to defend South Korea against North Korea.

Second, military deployment is represented through a gradual weakening of the perceived permanence of USFK in Korea. In 1992-1999, coverage highlights the argument that USFK should remain even after Korean unification because it would contribute to regional stability. In 1999-2006, the reports increasingly connect USFK with U.S. strategic flexibility and with the idea of a regional expeditionary force. At the same time, poor stationing conditions and short tours are used to indicate that some U.S. personnel had limited willingness to serve in Korea. In 2007-2018, the focus shifts to improving living conditions and extending service periods, which implies an effort to stabilize the force presence. In 2019-2023, South Korean anxieties about possible U.S. withdrawal become more visible, especially during disputes over

cost sharing and alliance commitments. Representative examples are as follows:

[6] 코언 장관은 특히 『한국의 김대중(김대중) 대통령은 그동안 남북한 통일이 실현되더라도 주한미군을 계속 주둔케 할 것이라는 입장을 수차례 표명했다』며 『주한미군은 지역 안정을 위해 중요하기 때문에 한반도 통일 후에도 계속 주둔해야 한다』고 말했다. (1998/7/1) (Minister Cohen said in particular, “South Korean President Kim Dae-jung has repeatedly stated that even if the reunification of North and South Korea is realized, he would maintain the continued stationing of U.S. Forces Korea,” adding that “because U.S. Forces Korea is important for regional stability, it should continue to be stationed even after the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.”)

[7] Washington wanted to turn the USFK into a “Northeast Asian expeditionary force,” and made this a priority issue since 2003. (2005/5/17)

[8] This is why one out of every two people associated with the USFK wish they weren’t working in Korea, and with the increased threat of terror, US military personnel are more hesitant than ever before to live off-post. (2001/12/17)

[9] USFK personnel have been here mostly on one-year tours without accompanying dependents, but the U.S. government has been trying to sign them up for longer since early this year by encouraging them to bring their families. (2009/12/16)

[10] Abrams’ statement alarmed nervous South Koreans who feared that it implies the USFK will stay no longer than that, whereas the official position in Seoul and Washington is that the two matters are independent of each other. (2019/2/15)

Example [6] contains two material processes. The first presents “South Korean President Kim Dae-jung” as the Actor who “expressed” the position that USFK would continue to be stationed; the second presents “USFK” as the Actor that “should be stationed.” By quoting the South Korean president, the sentence emphasizes USFK’s importance to the Korean Peninsula and argues that it should remain even after reunification. Example [7] is a transformative material process in which “Washington” is the Actor, “turn” is the process, and “Northeast Asian expeditionary force” is the Goal. This shows that the U.S. strategic orientation toward USFK extends beyond South Korean defense to the wider Northeast Asian region. Example [8] is a

desiderative mental process. The Senser is “one out of every two people associated with the USFK,” and the Phenomenon is their unwillingness to work in Korea, reflecting unfavorable stationing conditions. Example [9] uses a circumstantial relational process to show that USFK personnel were mostly on short-term one-year tours. In Example [10], “South Koreans” function as the Senser, and “feared” expresses anxiety over possible USFK withdrawal.

Third, stationing costs form a persistent negative theme. From the early 1990s onward, defense cost sharing is presented as a financial pressure on South Korea. In 1999-2006, the U.S. demand for a larger South Korean contribution is often linked with the question of whether Seoul truly wants USFK to remain. In 2007-2018, base relocation costs and maintenance expenses intensify the financial dimension of the issue. In 2019-2023, the image becomes more coercive, especially when the possible unpaid leave of Korean employees is connected with the demand for a higher South Korean contribution. In this dimension, USFK is represented not only as a security provider but also as an economic burden with institutional leverage. Representative examples are as follows:

[11] 한국측이 부담할 내년도 방위비 분담금은 주한미군 원화발생경비의 3분의 1을 부담키로 한 91년도 한-미 합의사항에 따라 2억 8천만 달러 수준이 될 것으로 전망되나 그동안 양국사이에 방위비 분담의 적용범위를 놓고 이견을 보이고 있어 협의과정에서 상당한 진통이 예상된다. (1994/8/9)

(The defense cost-sharing amount to be borne by the South Korean side for the following year is expected to reach approximately USD 280 million, in accordance with the 1991 ROK-U.S. agreement under which South Korea agreed to cover one-third of the won-denominated expenses generated by U.S. Forces Korea. However, as the two countries have differed over the applicable scope of defense cost sharing, considerable difficulties are expected during the negotiation process.)

[12] The general also called on South Korea to shoulder more of the cost of keeping U.S. forces on the peninsula, saying its willingness to do so was a good indicator of whether it wants the USFK to remain there. (2006/3/8)

[13] President Donald Trump claimed during his election campaign that Korea does not pay enough

for the USFK upkeep and hates to be seen to back down. (2018/2/1)

[14] The U.S. Forces Korea has threatened to send 9,000 Korean staff on unpaid leave from next April unless Seoul agrees to increase its share of the USFK's upkeep costs by year's end. (2019/10/4)

In Example [11], the projected meanings are signalled by “전망되다” (“is projected/expected”) and “예상된다” (“is expected”). The first projected Phenomenon is that the defense cost-sharing amount to be borne by the South Korean side would reach approximately USD 280 million, while the second is that considerable difficulties would arise during the negotiation process. The phrase “한국측이 부담할” represents South Korea as the party bearing the financial burden. Together with the reference to disagreements over the applicable scope of defense cost-sharing, the example foregrounds financial pressure on South Korea and reflects concern over rising USFK stationing costs.. Example [12] is a relational process in which “its willingness to do so” functions as the Carrier and “a good indicator” as the Attribute. This indicates that USFK general regarded South Korea's level of defense-cost sharing as a measure of whether Seoul truly wanted USFK to remain, thereby linking military presence with financial commitment and creating economic pressure on South Korea. Example [13] cites Donald Trump's campaign statement, showing the firm U.S. position that South Korea should pay more for USFK upkeep. In Example [14], “The U.S. Forces Korea” is the Actor, “send” is the process, and “9,000 Korean staff on unpaid leave” is the Goal. Meanwhile, “Seoul” is required to “increase” its share of USFK costs.

## (2) Diachronic Changes in the Interpersonal image of USFK based on Appraisal Theory

Fourth, in relation to regional peace, USFK is constructed as a stabilizing force whose perceived contribution gradually weakens. In 1992-1999, reports positively evaluate USFK as necessary for balancing regional powers and maintaining Peninsula stability. In 1999-2006, USFK is still described as a pillar of security and freedom on the Peninsula. In 2007-2018, its importance for regional security remains visible, but the positive tone becomes less exclusive because disputes over relocation, costs, and local impacts increase. In 2019-2023, USFK is represented both as a key defense force and as part of

a more difficult strategic environment shaped by North Korea, China, and U.S. regional strategy. Representative examples are as follows:

[15] 상당수의 국방부 관계자들은 주변 강대국으로부터의 위협을 막고 일본 및 중국의 군사대국화를 견제하기 위해선 통일 이후에도 주한미군 주둔 및 한-미 안보동맹관계 유지가 꼭 필요하다고 보고 있다. (1995/12/28)

(A considerable number of Defense Ministry officials believe that, in order to prevent threats from neighboring major powers and to check the military expansion of Japan and China, it is essential to maintain the stationing of U.S. Forces Korea and the ROK-U.S. security alliance even after reunification.)

[16] The USFK has been a pillar of the security on the Korean peninsula for the last half-century, and that is a reality which remains unchanged. (2003/2/7)

[17] The USFK plays an important role for the security of the peninsula and will continue to do so after 2012, he said. (2007/11/8)

[18] It also means that the U.S. will use the USFK as a front-line beachhead to contain China. (2021/9/6)

In Example [15], the expression “필요하다” (“necessary”) in the description of the ROK-U.S. alliance emphasizes that it remains necessary to maintain the alliance and retain USFK even after reunification. In Example [16], the expressions “a pillar of” and “that is a reality which remains unchanged” emphasize that USFK is crucial to South Korea's national security and interests and has made significant contributions to peace and freedom on the Peninsula. In Example [17], the description of USFK as playing “an important role” reflects the importance of USFK to the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula, as well as its key role in balancing China and Japan. In Example [18], the phrase “a front-line beachhead” reflects the role of USFK on the Korean Peninsula in defending the Peninsula and resisting North Korea and surrounding powerful adversaries.

Fifth, USFK is repeatedly constructed as a representative of U.S. power and interests in Northeast Asia. In 1992-1999, some reports associate USFK with dependence on foreign power or with the limitation of South Korean autonomy. In 1999-2006, USFK is sometimes represented as a diplomatic bargaining resource in relations with North Korea. In 2007-2018, the focus shifts to whether U.S. military

assets deployed in Korea primarily defend U.S. facilities and interests rather than South Korean society. In 2019-2023, USFK is increasingly linked with U.S. operational flexibility, emerging regional threats, and the maintenance of alliance stability. This image does not deny the security value of USFK, but it frames that value as inseparable from U.S. strategic priorities. Representative examples are as follows:

[19] 외세의존정책 포기, 주한미군 철수의 지 표명등을 해야 이른바 자주적인 정권, 문민정부가 될 수 있어 대화를 할 수 있지, 이를 실행 못하면 미제에 아부해 잔명을 부지해가는 친미파소분자라는 것이다. (1993/5/19)

(Only by abandoning a policy of dependence on foreign forces and expressing the will to withdraw U.S. Forces Korea can it become a so-called autonomous regime and civilian government with which dialogue is possible; if it fails to do so, it is merely a group of pro-American fascist elements that curry favor with U.S. imperialism in order to prolong their existence.)

[20] The series of recent comments emanating from the administration would indicate it views the American troops stationed in Korea as a bargaining chip with North Korea rather than as an allied force to prevent an invasion. (1999/4/7)

[21] The USFK has a battery of PAC-3 Patriot missiles which have full missile defense capabilities, but they are deployed to defend U.S. facilities such as Osan Air Base and not South Korea's army or people." (2007/7/12)

[22] The United States must maintain operational flexibility to ensure that our forces are optimized and ready to meet emerging threats to U.S. forces and allies. (2021/3/8)

Example [19] emphasizes that "only by expressing the will to withdraw USFK can an autonomous regime and civilian government be realized," indicating that USFK is an agent of the United States. In Example [20], the phrase "the American troops stationed in Korea as a bargaining chip with North Korea" indicates that the South Korean government regarded USFK as a bargaining chip. Example [21] emphasizes the image that USFK's weapons and equipment are intended to protect U.S. interests. In Example [22], the phrase "meet emerging threats to U.S. forces and allies" reflects the image of USFK as safeguarding U.S. interests and alliance stability.

Sixth, the coverage constructs USFK as a force that continually improves combat capability, defense capacity, mobility, advanced weaponry, and strategic adaptability. In 1992-1999, modernization of tanks, missile defense, and military equipment is emphasized. In 1999-2006, mobility and firepower are described as new elements of deterrence. In 2007-2018, advanced systems such as Patriot missiles contribute to an image of strong defense capacity. In 2019-2023, operational flexibility and readiness to meet emerging threats become central evaluative themes. This dimension produces a relatively positive image of USFK as technologically advanced, militarily competent, and strategically adaptive. Representative examples are as follows:

[23] 그는 주한미군이 위협에 대항할 수 있는 막강한 힘을 보유하고 있으며 지난 수년간 탱크체제와 전역미사일방어, 부수적인 군사장비 등의 현대화를 추진했다고 말하고 앞으로도 이 같은 현대화와 개별장비의 현대화를 계속해야 한다고 밝혔다. (1996/6/13)

(He said that U.S. Forces Korea possessed overwhelming strength capable of countering threats and had promoted the modernization of tank systems, theater missile defense, and supplementary military equipment over the past several years. He also stated that such modernization and the modernization of individual equipment should continue in the future.)

[24] Chief Information Officer Samuel Taylor said General Thomas Schwarz testified to the US Congress on March 9 concerning the plan, stressing its mobility and firepower as new elements of the USFK's deterrence. (2002/3/12)

[25] The USFK has a battery of PAC-3 Patriot missiles which have full missile defense capabilities. (2007/7/12)

[26] The United States must maintain operational flexibility to ensure that our forces are optimized and ready to meet emerging threats to U.S. forces and allies. (2021/3/8)

In Example [23], the expression "탱크체제와 전역미사일방어, 부수적인 군사장비 등의 현대화를 추진했다; 이 같은 현대화와 개별장비의 현대화를 계속해야 한다" ("promoted the modernization of the tank system, theater missile defense, and auxiliary military equipment; such modernization and the modernization of individual equipment should continue in the future") shows that, in order to respond to the North Korean threat, USFK

introduced modern weapons and equipment to counter threats, thereby highlighting its possession of modernized weapons and equipment systems. In Example [24], the phrase “stressing its mobility and firepower as new elements of the USFK’s deterrence” emphasizes USFK’s enhancement of force mobility and strike capability. In Example [25], the phrase “have full missile defense capabilities” reflects the strong defensive capacity of USFK’s weapons and equipment. In Example [26], the expressions “maintain operational flexibility” and “meet emerging threats to U.S. forces and allies” reflect that USFK is committed to improving combat capability and operational efficiency and can make corresponding tactical and strategic adjustments according to national strategic needs and changes in the regional security environment.

Seventh, civil-military relations constitute the most negative dimension. In 1992-1999, reports draw attention to crimes involving U.S. personnel, weak punishment, lax discipline, and the impact of U.S. bases on local life. In 1999-2006, the deaths of two South Korean schoolgirls in an armored-vehicle accident become a major symbol of civil-military tension. In 2007-2018, crime, local complaints, and opposition to base relocation continue to shape the image of USFK as a source of social disturbance. In 2019-2023, protests against deployment and access to the THAAD site show that military strategy and local public sentiment remain in conflict. This dimension complicates the stabilizing image of USFK by highlighting social insecurity and resentment. Representative examples are as follows:

[27] 지금까지 주한미군 범죄는 연평균 2천 2백여건이 발생하고 있지만 재판권 행사율은 연평균 2%에도 못 미치고 있는 실정이 큰 문제점으로 지적돼 왔다. (1995/10/29)

(To date, an average of more than 2,200 crimes involving U.S. Forces Korea personnel have occurred each year, but the rate at which jurisdiction has been exercised has remained below an annual average of 2%, which has been pointed out as a major problem.)

[28] Three USFK soldiers were assaulted and one was forcibly abducted Saturday by Korean demonstrators protesting the June 13 armored vehicle accident that killed two Korean teenage girls. (2002/9/17)

[29] For six months thereafter, there was a significant rise in crime, and local residents near

USFK camps complained frequently, a USFK officer said. (2009/4/29)

[30] It has been in the works since then-USFK Commander Vincent Brooks recommended it to the Pentagon in 2017 but has been hampered by a protest blockade that makes the THAAD site effectively inaccessible except by helicopter. (2021/3/12)

Example [27] compares the average annual number of crimes committed by USFK personnel with the rate at which jurisdiction was exercised, reflecting USFK’s loose discipline, poor management, and lack of effective restriction by local laws in South Korean society. In Example [28], the affective resources “were assaulted” and “was forcibly abducted,” which indicate “insecurity,” emphasize public anger toward USFK, the severity of civil-military conflict, and the unsafe living environment faced by USFK. In Example [29], the expressions “a significant rise in crime” and “complained frequently” indicate that USFK caused certain problems for public security in South Korean society. In Example [30], the phrase “hampered by a protest blockade” reflects South Korean public dissatisfaction with USFK’s deployment of the THAAD system.

### 3. Summary

This study has examined the diachronic construction of USFK’s image in *The Chosun Ilbo* after the Cold War through a corpus-assisted SFL and socio-cognitive approach. It shows that USFK is represented through an ambivalent image structure. On the one hand, it is a security guarantor, a stabilizing regional force, a technologically advanced military presence, and an important component of the ROK-U.S. alliance. On the other hand, it is also a financial burden, an instrument of U.S. strategic interest, a source of dependence, and a cause of civil-military tension. The diachronic changes are closely related to shifts in the Peninsula security environment and alliance politics. When North Korean threats become salient, USFK’s security value is strengthened. When cost sharing, relocation, crime, or local protest becomes prominent, negative evaluation increases. The image of USFK therefore does not move in a single linear direction. It is reconstructed through changing combinations of security dependence, strategic suspicion, financial pressure, military modernization, and local social

conflict.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to this work.

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