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The Evolution of U.S. Perceptions and Role in the Gwangju Uprising

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Abstract. The Gwangju Uprising stands as a pivotal historical event in South Korea's democratization process and has become a significant case study for the international community in examining U.S. alliance policies and value positions in East Asia. Initially, the U.S. viewed the protests as manageable student unrest. As the situation escalated, however, it gradually recognized that the movement's protagonists had shifted from students to citizens, exhibiting broad-based and emotional characteristics. The U.S. attributed the uprising to political repression, campus issues, and localism. Further assessing the Gwangju Uprising's implications, the U.S. anticipated it would trigger political instability in South Korea, fuel anti-American sentiment, and diminish anti-communist fervor, revealing a pessimistic outlook on the nation's political future. Simultaneously, the U.S. adopted a dual role during the incident: on one hand, the government acted as a "mediator," reconciling conflicts between students and South Korean authorities—essentially stabilizing the domestic political landscape to safeguard U.S. interests in East Asia and uphold anti-communist principles; On the other hand, American missionaries and civilian groups conducted extensive humanitarian aid and shelter operations in Gwangju, which to some extent shaped America's moral image in South Korea. By examining the cognitive and behavioral logic of the United States during the Gwangju Uprising, this study offers new empirical evidence and interpretive pathways for understanding the complexity of U.S.-South Korea relations during the late Cold War era, as well as the clash between values and realities within the alliance politics.

Keywords: Gwangju Uprising, United States, Role, Cold War

1. Introduction

The Gwangju Uprising, also known as the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement, was a spontaneous democratic movement initiated by Gwangju citizens and students on May 18, 1980, to oppose the dictatorial regime of Chun Doo-hwan [1]. As a significant case study of 20th-century East Asian democratic movements, the Gwangju Uprising not only accelerated South Korea's domestic democratization but also sparked intense international reactions, particularly enduring debates over the United States' role in the events.

Academic research on the Gwangju Uprising has developed multiple perspectives, primarily focusing on dimensions such as national leaders, participating actors, and literary works, while

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showing a trend toward shifting from macro-narratives to micro-analysis. At the macro level, some studies focus on uncovering the truth of the Gwangju Uprising and its place in national memory. For instance, eyewitness Jae-Eui Lee collected extensive authentic materials and records to reveal the true nature of the events, with his work becoming a crucial resource for research on the incident [2]. meanwhile, Hang Kim adopts dual perspectives—that of soldiers and civilians—to depict the conflict of distinguishing "enemy" from "friend", as well as how the nation subsequently addressed this unique chapter of national memory [3]. Other studies examine the Gwangju Uprising within the broader historical context of South Korea's democratic transition. Dong Xiangrong argues that the Gwangju massacre made South Korea's authoritarian government more cautious in using force, thereby accelerating the political transition toward democracy [4]. Meanwhile, Yan Jin utilize declassified U.S. archives to contend that the Gwangju Uprising vividly exemplified the Carter administration's shift in human rights diplomacy toward South Korea—from emphasizing political freedom to prioritizing stability in the region [5]. Concurrently, some studies examine the Gwangju Uprising's impact through an anti-Americanism lens. For instance, Liu Yinping systematically traces the event's development, elucidating how it became the "trigger" for the rise of anti-American sentiment in 1980s South Korea [6]. Zhan Debin and Liang Zhi noted that the United States is striving to clarify its connection to the Gwangju Incident in response to South Korea's anti-American sentiment, emphasizing that this anti-American sentiment stems from the asymmetry in U.S.–South Korea relations and the U.S. hegemony [7].

At the micro level, scholars increasingly focus on case studies and specific actions. For instance, Lee Jong-in compares the geopolitical perspectives of key leaders Yun Han-bong and Yun Sang-won, reflecting on America's role and influence in South Korea [8]. Noh Young-ki delves into the background and execution of the "Sangmu Chungjeong Plan" carried out by the Airborne Forces, offering a more concrete military perspective on the incident [9]. From a comparative perspective, Wang Mian analyzed the scale, level of violence, and evolving U.S. stance during different phases of the Gwangju protests by contrasting South Korea's "Gwangju Uprising" with Taiwan's Formosa Incident through the lens of protest politics [10].

Academic discourse on the Gwangju Uprising has extensively explored multiple dimensions including politics, society, and culture, with a widespread recognition of its connection to the United States. However, existing research largely treats the United States as an external backdrop or one influencing factor, lacking a systematic examination centered on the U.S. as the cognitive subject from an internal perspective. Addressing this research gap, this paper draws upon U.S. government archives and relevant diplomatic documents to deeply analyze the U.S. authorities' overall cognitive process regarding the causes, development, and outcomes of the Gwangju Uprising, clarifying the role and impact the U.S. played in the event. Constructing an analytical framework centered on the United States aims to dissect issues such as U.S.-South Korea relations during the final phase of the Cold War and the tension between values and interests within alliance politics. This approach seeks to address gaps in existing research while pioneering new empirical and interpretive pathways.

2. The outbreak of the Gwangju Uprising and the U.S. response

On October 26, 1979, President Park Chung-hee was assassinated by Kim Jae-gyu, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency. South Korea subsequently declared a nationwide state of martial law. Amid this power vacuum, Security Commander Chun Doo-hwan seized the opportunity to stage a military coup, appointing his brother-in-law to key martial law positions. However, the dictatorship established by Chun Doo-hwan quickly provoked intense public discontent in South Korea. Nationwide waves of worker and student protests erupted, demanding the lifting of martial law and

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.LD30331

Chun Doo-hwan's resignation. By early May 1980, the student movement escalated further. On the afternoon of May 2, approximately 1,000 students at Chungbuk University in Jeonju participated in demonstrations chanting political slogans. In Daegu, students at Chonnam University clashed with police, resulting in casualties and the burning of police vehicles. Severe disturbances also erupted on the Chonnam University campus in Gwangju [11]. At the time, the South Korean government did not crack down forcefully on such activities, "seeming to tolerate demonstrations as long as they remained confined to campus grounds" [11]. Despite secret communications between the government and student groups, protests across campuses continued to escalate, gradually evolving into coordinated, organized actions. Particularly after the suppression of the "Spring of Seoul," frequent protests erupted at universities in Gwangju during the spring of 1980. "Whether or not there was psychological connection or any relationship, this attitude of opposition within campuses subsequently sparked a revival of anti-government activities" [12].

The United States closely monitored South Korea's student resistance movement, expressing deep concern over its potential impact on the nation's stability. On May 14, just before the Gwangju Uprising erupted, the U.S. requested through its ambassador that Kim Dae-jung urge restraint among the public, particularly students—a call Kim heeded [10].Despite concerns over student unrest, the U.S. remained largely optimistic and did not view it as the beginning of a "disintegration process" for the South Korean government [13]. However, on May 15, students from Gwangju schools held a large anti-government rally, followed by a torchlight procession in the evening. Participants chanted slogans against martial law and Chun Doo-hwan, with the event concluding at 9 p.m [12]. The South Korean military had taken the student declaration seriously and was actively preparing for military intervention. According to U.S. archives: "The South Korean military has informed U.S. command of the following troop movements in preparation for contingencies." On May 8, the 13th Special Forces Brigade will be transferred to the Special Operations Center southeast of Seoul for temporary duties. On May 10, the 11th Special Forces Brigade will be transferred to the Gimpo Peninsula and stationed alongside the 1st Special Forces Brigade for temporary duties. These two brigades, totaling approximately 2,500 personnel, were deployed to the Seoul area to counter potential student demonstrations" [14]. Moreover, on the same day, an American missionary traveling to Daejeon observed a large number of new recruits on the train, noting that "the behavior of these recruits was becoming increasingly uncontrollable, posing physical danger to civilian passengers" [12].

Regarding the causes of the "Gwangju Uprising," the U.S. identified several factors: First, "political actions taken in Seoul" [15], which constituted the fundamental cause. The "Spring of Seoul" had briefly offered South Koreans hope for democratization, but Chun Doo-hwan's violent "military purge coup" abruptly ended this, intensifying conflicts between the military government and society and directly precipitating the uprising [10]. The U.S. appointment and support of Chun Doo-hwan further inflamed public discontent. Second, "internal campus issues"led to polarized attitudes within universities, subsequently reviving anti-government activities. Student groups repeatedly challenged law and order, mobilized citizens beyond campus boundaries, and intensified societal conflicts. While much responsibility lay with immature students and radical leaders, President Choi also bore blame for failing to clearly articulate the issues at hand, thereby fueling widespread public suspicion [16]. Third, regionalism and defiance. Though attitudes toward Kim Dae-jung varied elsewhere, Jeolla Province residents almost universally supported him as their regional representative and symbol of clean governance. News of Kim Dae-jung's political suppression and the imposition of martial law delivered a profound shock to the people of Jeolla, who long perceived themselves as "second-class citizens." This led nearly all social strata in the region to become embroiled in a violent, localized "mass brawl," escalating protests into fierce

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confrontation with authorities—a reflection of deep-seated historical regional antagonism. Beyond regionalism, the military and police responded with unusually harsh measures when challenged by protesters, "perhaps because they believed this was the proper way to treat the people of Jeolla" [17].

The Gwangju Uprising plunged South Korea into prolonged disorder and danger, intensifying tensions sparked by student issues and activating numerous latent conflicts. Student actions provided strong backing for figures like Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam, pushing them toward riskier political moves—such as demanding the resignation of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, and launching sit-in protests for the New Democratic Party. To mitigate the conflict, the United States supported the South Korean government's decision to "use military force when necessary to maintain order" [16]. However, it remained acutely aware of the immense risks involved, urging measures to minimize casualties and avoid actions that could politically alienate the populace through suppression. The U.S. expressed grave concern over the deployment of special forces to Gwangju. While not directly blocking the operation, it made clear its opposition to their use [15].

Overall, the U.S. perception and response to the Gwangju Uprising revealed a profound contradiction between its strategic considerations and its value commitments: on one hand, attributing the incident to multiple factors including South Korean politics, campus mobilization, and localism; on the other, seeking a balance between maintaining order and upholding democracy.

3. U.S. observations on the Gwangju Uprising

On May 18, airborne troops entered Gwangju City and began indiscriminately attacking young citizens that afternoon. "Regardless of prior provocation, these individuals witnessed assaults of varying severity" [12]. American missionaries witnessed soldiers beating fallen individuals with clubs and kicking them from the window of the Gwangju Tourist Hotel.

May 19 marked the phase where government forces attempted to quell the demonstrations, with severe violent incidents occurring frequently. The intensity and frequency of these incidents continued to escalate until the withdrawal of the military and accompanying police. The first recorded riot occurred during a small-scale resistance on the afternoon of May 19: Mr. David Miller of the U.S. Information Service reported attempts to set fire to government buildings.Paratroopers launched large-scale raids targeting youth, intercepting buses and searching public spaces including restaurants, the YWCA, and Catholic centers [12]. Some Gwangju residents even claimed the military's brutality exceeded that of North Koreans in the past. However, the latest report from the Defense Security Command stated that the number of participants in the "Gwangju Incident" was far lower than rumors suggested, and the actual number of casualties remained unclear [18].

The morning of May 20th was relatively calm. American missionaries could safely withdraw money from banks, and young people within the targeted age group walked the streets as if nothing were amiss. However, during a large evening rally, clashes erupted between the crowd and police. Gunfire was heard at the scene, resulting in casualties among military and police personnel. Public buildings, police stations, and three radio stations were damaged or burned down.

On May 21, casualties occurred frequently. The first reported casualty at Gwangju Christian Hospital was a man stabbed in the back with a bayonet by soldiers while inquiring about his child's condition [12]. By approximately 4:00 PM, the hospital had recorded ten deaths and about fifty injuries. An estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people gathered in downtown Gwangju and began attacking security forces and public buildings: at least five police stations were assaulted, two radio stations were burned down, and the local martial law command headquarters, Gwangju City Hall, a post office, and the provincial government building were all besieged or occupied. The main railway line to the north was blocked. Protesters had seized control of most areas of the city, chanting

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slogans such as "Release Kim Dae-jung," "Execute Chun Doo-hwan," and "Lift martial law." "Rioters" had broken into an armory, seizing weapons, ammunition, and a personnel carrier, further escalating the situation. People from outside the city, particularly from the nearby port of Mokpo, were reportedly arriving to provide support.

Faced with the escalating crisis, the South Korean government confronts a series of extremely difficult choices. It seeks to negotiate a ceasefire to engage in talks with the "mob" over their demands for an apology, prisoner releases, and the withdrawal of martial law troops. Meanwhile, the South Korean military plans to withdraw forces from the city center tonight, though roadblocks will remain. Defenses will concentrate on two military installations and a prison holding 21,000 leftist detainees [19]. The U.S. has also initiated evacuation plans. American journalist Miller in Gwangju has joined 30 American missionaries at the Gwangju Christian Church, awaiting helicopter evacuation to a nearby South Korean air base [20].

On May 22, protesters reoccupied Gwangju. A pre-evacuation broadcast monitored by the FBI reported that Gwangju demonstrators "had swelled to 150,000 that day and ultimately degenerated into mobs." These "mobs" had seized 238 vehicles, approximately 3,500 firearms, and 46,400 pounds of ammunition, engaging in fierce combat with South Korean forces. "The city of Gwangju has completely descended into a scene of terror." Official restraint, through military withdrawal and public dialogue, formed a deliberate strategy of containment to prevent escalation. The government seeks cooperation from Kim Dae-jung's followers to stabilize the situation, but if peaceful means fail, it plans to deploy the 20th Infantry Division along with airborne and special forces to implement full alert status in South Jeolla Province [21].

As the Gwangju Uprising unfolded, U.S. perceptions of its nature gradually evolved and deepened. The U.S. assessed the uprising as a large-scale civilian rebellion against the South Korean government, characterized by emotional outbursts and localized destruction. While student participation dominated the early stages, civilian involvement grew in the later phases [12].

May 18, 1980, marked a pivotal turning point where the Gwangju Uprising shifted from being primarily student-led to citizen-led. "From this point onward, the May 18th Gwangju incident clearly became the affair of Gwangju citizens and should no longer be discussed as primarily student-led. I was among the last to acknowledge this fact, but I was forced to accept it, and I believe it is indisputable" [12]. That morning, after police and troops temporarily withdrew, citizens applauded and cheered for the students, continuously supplying them with provisions—from wooden sticks initially to beverages and bread later. The fervor among citizens and students resembled the electric atmosphere before a hometown team's game night rather than the prelude to combat. It can be said that the entire city embraced and supported the students' protest.

Meanwhile, the United States characterized the events as a large-scale, emotional, and disorderly violent incident, repeatedly labeling the resisting demonstrators as "rioters": "Paratroopers were reportedly defending against rioters firing two automatic weapons from the roof of Chonnam Medical College. There were also reports of rioters firing at helicopters in the air." [21]. The events in Gwangju demonstrated citizens pushed to their limits, expressing spontaneous anger disconnected from any policy or plan, which led to a temporary breakdown of social order. This can be compared to the Boston Tea Party: both were lawless, emotional, and destructive acts, driven not by calculated benefit but by a collective refusal to endure further oppression. The direct cause of the "Gwangju Incident" was a student movement centered on democracy and human rights, not a conscious effort by citizens to fight for civil rights. Therefore, the "Gwangju Incident" exhibited a high degree of disorganization and emotionality.

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Moreover, grounded in a deep understanding of South Korea's political landscape, the U.S. maintained a cautious skepticism toward the official South Korean narrative and realistically anticipated that the authorities would be unlikely to issue a formal apology. On May 31, the Republic of Korea Defense Law Command released a 5,000-word comprehensive report on the Gwangju Uprising, attributing it to professional incitement by communist agents and followers of Kim Dae-jung. It disclosed official death toll figures and denied rumors of military atrocities on May 18. However, Ambassador to South Korea Grayston stated: "The reaction from Koreans we spoke with, including those who are typically conservative and supportive of the government, was one of skepticism" [22]. The U.S. identified several questionable aspects of this report: First, it failed to explain why citizens joined the students' ranks; Second, sensational rumors are commonplace in South Korea and typically do not trigger widespread panic. Third, the casualty figures provided in the report were considered extremely low by most South Koreans. Fourth, while the report included vivid details—such as infiltrators dismantling explosives—it was unlikely to be widely accepted as the definitive authoritative account of the Gwangju Uprising. Consequently, the U.S. clearly deemed this official report unconvincing.

Furthermore, based on its understanding of the South Korean government, the U.S. concluded that "an official apology is highly improbable" [23]. This assessment was corroborated by the South Korean authorities' handling of the matter and the official report itself. Following the incident, South Korean authorities initially condemned "those who disrupted harmony and order in Gwangju" in public discourse, deliberately distinguishing between highly impressionable citizens and violent "impure elements" or "hardcore elements". Subsequently, they heavily publicized the arrest of North Korean infiltrators attempting to enter Gwangju, implying that "impure elements" and communist agitators were orchestrating the entire incident behind the scenes [23]. Ultimately, the government shifted the blame onto three scapegoats: officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs who had barely participated in the incident, communist forces, and the United States. Glasstein noted: "The authorities issued some official statements expressing 'regret,' but it seems to have stopped there. Their attitude toward apologizing is unlikely to go any further" [23].

In summary, U.S. understanding of the Gwangju Uprising evolved substantially: from initially perceiving it as student unrest, to recognizing its nature as a civic resistance movement, and finally to appreciating the participants' self-discipline and solidarity, ultimately forming a comprehensive assessment of the event and the South Korean government's role.

4. The United States' role in the Gwangju Uprising and its reflections

From May 23 to 26, the situation in Gwangju entered a phase of negotiations and "mutual restraint" [12]. While closely monitoring the Gwangju situation, South Korean authorities had not publicly expressed any sympathy toward the radical students up to that point [24]. Some student leaders requested U.S. intervention, hoping Ambassador Glastein would serve as a mediator to draft a ceasefire agreement, but the U.S. ultimately refused. Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence had confirmed that South Korean special forces were on standby, despite official South Korean denials. When local authorities in Gwangju conveyed the U.S. position to residents, they portrayed it as American support for military intervention. The U.S. ambassador, sensing an attempt by the South Korean government to shift blame onto the United States, lodged a strong protest. Subsequently, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff explained that the broadcast was "a one-time action taken by local authorities without proper authorization" [24].

By the early morning of May 27, the South Korean military swiftly and orderly reoccupied Gwangju through military operations. The city offered no resistance, and the takeover occurred with

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remarkably little bloodshed [12]. To alleviate public panic, the South Korean government implemented a series of measures, including troop withdrawals, bomb disposal, burials of the deceased, and the release of detainees, which "received a degree of public approval" [22]. While displaying a generous posture, the government simultaneously pursued and dealt with dissidents and agitators behind the scenes, focusing primarily on the issue of rumors and launching a multifaceted and intense crackdown on them [25]. Two months after the Gwangju Incident, Gwangju had largely returned to normal in many respects. However, the United States noted that among the populace, the shadow of the incident continued to weigh heavily, with a pervasive and persistent sense of fear [26]. As a pivotal moment in South Korea's democratization process, the Gwangju Incident's impact extends far beyond its temporal and spatial boundaries. Based on its observational stance and strategic considerations, the United States conducted a systematic assessment of the incident's consequences, focusing on three core dimensions:

First, the incident delivered a profound shock to South Korea's political stability—its most immediate impact. The U.S. assessed that "while the military might deploy considerable force to restore order, it had already inflicted sufficient damage, leaving wounds that would fester for years." [17]This trauma extended beyond physical destruction to profound psychological scars. An American missionary who witnessed the events noted: "'The people's feelings will not be appeased' unless the martial law authorities apologize for the 'brutal acts' committed by their troops." [23]The people of Gwangju widely believe that history will ultimately vindicate them, though when and how that day will arrive remains unclear. They view their current endurance as a process of gathering strength. Once a strong leader emerges, this state of waiting for the right moment could swiftly transform into direct anti-government action.Surveys indicate widespread belief that a suitable catalyst could spark another violent conflict, potentially more severe than the May unrest [26]. Public opinion pointed the finger squarely at Chun Doo-hwan himself. They categorically denied any communist agent activity in Gwangju, attributing the tragedy directly to Chun's radical leadership style. His tactics drew comparisons to the Nazis, and when contrasted with former President Park Chung-hee, people asserted that Chun bore direct responsibility for the even more severe economic downturn that befell Jeolla Province in the aftermath of the incident.Meanwhile, as early as May 21, 1980, the United States had assessed: "We anticipate that the people of Jeolla will grow increasingly dissatisfied with the military and the central government, feeling excluded from full representation in the nation as a whole" [17]. In response, regionalis—a key factor that initially fueled the Gwangju Uprising—was further reinforced afterward at the expense of national unity. Thus, the Gwangju Uprising intensified social conflicts within South Korea, exacerbating the already chaotic and unstable situation. The United States also held little optimism regarding the future political stability of South Korea.

Second, it became a pivotal turning point in the rise of anti-American sentiment in South Korea. The Gwangju Uprising shattered the entrenched perception of South Korea as a " [27]," laying the groundwork for the anti-American wave of the 1980s. Following the Gwangju Uprising, while South Koreans disagreed on the extent to which the U.S. had effectively endorsed Chun Doo-hwan's handling of the incident, all interviewees held that the unrest's severity was contingent on U.S. acquiescence and its management of Chun Doo-hwan [26]. This stems from a long-held conviction among Koreans: given America's formidable power and deep-rooted connections across all facets of Korean society, it naturally bears responsibility for major events. This belief led even those who distrusted the media to accept without question reports unfavorable to the United States. Yet the U.S. was not unaware of this widespread perception in Korea at the time. "Moreover, the Gwangju unrest injected a dose of anti-American sentiment into the political environment. Many Koreans believed

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the U.S. could control the situation, and the consequences of the unrest—including deaths, beatings, and burnings—would make them feel America's so-called failure more acutely." [17]This was the earliest mention by the U.S. of anti-American sentiment in Korea following the Gwangju incident. Although the U.S. had long recognized South Koreans' belief that America bore responsibility for the Gwangju Incident and detected some resulting anti-American sentiment, it dismissed this as merely "seeking an external scapegoat" [17], laying the groundwork for its subsequent insistence on the doctrine of non-responsibility.

Third, it weakened South Korean public sentiment toward anti-communism. In the Jeolla region, hostility toward Chun Doo-hwan intensified to the point of significantly dampening enthusiasm for anti-communism. While no one openly supported communism—which in the South Korean context equated to treason—it was widely believed that the communist threat had been deliberately exaggerated. "In Gwangju today, people are subdued and unable to muster positive enthusiasm for anti-communism, the purge movement, or other government policies" [26]. Public resistance to the military regime extended to skepticism about its entire value system, creating a latent ideological alienation. This shift directly contradicted the deeply entrenched anti-communist principles the United States upheld during the Cold War. It not only undermined the ideological foundation of the U.S.-South Korea alliance but also potentially impacted America's strategic posture on the Korean Peninsula. Consequently, the subtle ideological changes emerging in South Korean society after the Gwangju Uprising were viewed by the United States as a development posing significant strategic risks and one it was extremely reluctant to see unfold. It also became a crucial factor in subsequent assessments of U.S.-South Korea relations.

In summary, the United States recognized that the Gwangju Uprising had profound, multi-layered impacts on South Korea: it intensified domestic political conflicts and regional divisions, fueled a growing anti-American sentiment, and simultaneously weakened public anti-communist convictions. The U.S. role in the Gwangju Uprising can be interpreted from both governmental and private perspectives. For the U.S. government, America served as a mediator, attempting to reconcile conflicts between protest groups and the government—a stance fundamentally aligned with the strategic goal of countering communist expansion. For private citizens, Americans provided extensive assistance to those in need in Gwangju, offering shelter and aid, demonstrating an intervention approach distinct from the official stance.

From the outset of its involvement in Korean Peninsula affairs, the United States' core strategic objective has been to contain the expansion of the socialist bloc. This fundamental principle dictated its adoption of a "mediator" stance during the Gwangju Uprising, seeking to ease tensions between the government and its citizens to maintain political stability. Consequently, it was inherently unable to prevent the Gwangju Uprising from occurring. As early as May 8, 1980, the U.S. government stated that "Nick and the South Korean government both hope that clashes between students and the government will not undermine national stability." However, the fundamental reason was that "neither side wants an unfavorable situation to arise" [16]. This "unfavorable situation" referred to instability within South Korea, the expansion of North Korean and Soviet influence, and the potential for communism to exploit such vulnerabilities. As Glastein advised: "Should the unrest intensify, I recommend the State Department consider reiterating the May 18 statement, emphasizing calls for all parties to stabilize the situation, establish dialogue, and avoid divisions that could significantly heighten external threats" [19].

Therefore, to stabilize the political situation, the United States stated, "We agree that we should not oppose emergency plans formulated by South Korea to maintain public order" [16]. However, it is undeniable that the United States has consistently sought to ease tensions between the government

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and students, repeatedly urging restraint and caution: "We urge all parties involved to exercise maximum restraint and engage in dialogue to seek peaceful solutions" [28]. On the eve of the Gwangju Uprising, the U.S. suggested to the South Korean government that it could consult the National Intelligence Service to analyze the true motives behind student pressure on the government. This, it noted, "might provide an opportunity to highlight the chain reaction of overreaction and the unresolved suspicions toward the regime prevalent in South Korean society" [16]. Simultaneously, while consenting to South Korea's use of military suppression to resolve the conflict, the U.S. repeatedly cautioned that "if law enforcement responsibilities are executed improperly and lack prudence and restraint, it could lead to escalation of the situation" [16]. However, the essence of the U.S. government's "mediating role" was to reconcile political factions, maintain the balance of power between the capitalist and socialist blocs, and prevent "continued unrest and escalating violence from leading to dangerous miscalculations and exploitation by external forces" [28].

Compared to the government, Americans in Gwangju—particularly missionaries and Peace Corps volunteers—played a significant humanitarian role through nonviolent intervention, earning widespread gratitude from the citizens.Volunteers stepped forward one after another, forming human shields to protect the victims. Their actions forced the attackers to repeatedly halt and shift their focus, thereby safeguarding numerous citizens.The residences of American missionaries became shelters and centers of hope for the vast majority, demonstrating the stature they had earned in the hearts of the entire Christian community. In times of crisis, it was Presbyterian missionary families whom the community turned to for essential support. They answered calls for advice, provided assistance and shelter, and served as the primary source of practical and compassionate support when calamity struck. On May 22, American missionaries escorted young people to Gwangju in two cars displaying American flags and "Foreign Vehicle" signs. Upon arrival, they were welcomed by local citizens. Moreover, American missionaries played a role in advancing the Gwangju Uprising, serving as a bridge between student groups and the government. They agreed to seek members for a reconciliation delegation and advised them to secure sufficient time for negotiations. By the morning of May 26, troop movements validated their efforts. The actions of Americans in Gwangju demonstrated their commitment to serving the people alongside them, even facing grave and potentially fatal dangers. This made all who witnessed it realize that "Americans (and America) genuinely cared about them", earning widespread praise for the United States.

The distinct roles of official and private American actors were not entirely isolated; communication existed between them. As the U.S. government became aware of anti-American sentiment in South Korea, members of these unofficial American communities also recognized the issue. Increasingly, they voiced concerns about America's role in the unfolding situation, noting that their Korean friends "believed the U.S. fully supported the South Korean military" [24]. Upon learning of this, U.S. officials provided detailed explanations of the situation and American positions, hoping these individuals would appropriately convey this information within their Korean social circles. Americans in Korea thus represent a broader spectrum of the U.S. perspective, showcasing another facet of America's stance during the Gwangju Uprising.

5. Conclusion

As a pivotal moment in South Korea's democratization process, the Gwangju Uprising profoundly shaped the nation's political landscape and collective memory while significantly impacting U.S.-South Korea relations and America's strategic role in East Asia. The U.S. perception of the Gwangju Uprising evolved from viewing it as a "student riot" to recognizing it as a "civil uprising," while also acknowledging the deep-seated political oppression, regionalism, and internal campus issues

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underlying the events. However, despite recognizing the incident's essence as popular resistance against authoritarian rule, U.S. policy remained constrained by anti-communist priorities and alliance interests, failing to effectively uphold its professed values of democracy and human rights. This not only deepened South Korean public disappointment and suspicion toward the United States but also became a significant catalyst for the rise of anti-American sentiment in South Korea during the 1980s. This stance led to America's dual role in the Gwangju Uprising: On one hand, driven by Cold War strategy and regional stability concerns, the U.S. government officially supported the South Korean authorities' "maintenance of order." While verbally calling for restraint and dialogue, it failed to substantively prevent the military crackdown; On the other hand, American civil society forces in Gwangju—particularly missionaries and Peace Corps volunteers—actively engaged in humanitarian rescue and shelter efforts. These actions mitigated the conflict's brutality to some extent and earned the United States partial moral credibility.

The Gwangju Uprising not only exposed the tension between values and interests within the U.S.-South Korea alliance but also revealed the limitations of U.S. policy when confronting internal crises among its allies during the Cold War's final phase. By constructing an analysis centered on the United States, this paper fills an existing research gap in the systematic study of U.S. perceptions and decision-making mechanisms. It further provides new empirical and theoretical paths for understanding the complexity of "other" perspectives in transnational historical events.

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