Today many people, in particular Americans, term the contemporary South Korean-U.S. relationship a partnership, away from the past patron-client relationship. For instance, Donald P. Gregg, U.S. ambassador to South Korea, testified in his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 12 May 1989 that "as our relationship has evolved over the years, it has moved away from that of patron to client. It is now a relationship between partners—equal partners. This in my view is not only an inevitable development, but a healthy one." Also in an address before the Korean Council on Foreign Relations on 21 November 1990, he stated that "Korea and the United States can continue to move along the transitional path from a military alliance to an economic and political partnership." President Ronald Reagan emphasized the theme of partnership when he visited South Korea in 1983.

Clearly, the present South Korean-U.S. relationship is undergoing profound changes as both countries emerge from the postwar world and generation. The changes have been mainly triggered by South Korea’s rapid economic growth, political liberalization, increased self-defense capability, and Koreans’ new independence and national pride. Ambassador Gregg pointed out that "Korea has long since emerged from the ashes of war, and today enjoys the status of a rising middle-rank economic power. It proudly played host to the magnificent 1988 Olympics. Important democratic reforms have been introduced. The country is assuming greater responsibility for its own defense. Korea’s reliance on U.S. support is less than before." He stressed that "it is natural for the two countries to adjust their relationship according to these changes." In his speech in Seoul on 18 August 1989, Congress-
man Stephen Solarz mentioned that “changes in South Korea” should be reflected in the South Korean–U.S. relationship. This relationship is in the midst of a transition, and is often defined as a “partnership.” This essay analyzes the nature of recent changes in the South Korean–U.S. relationship and examines whether it may be termed a relationship between partners.

Past South Korean–American Relations

Although Korea and the United States signed a treaty of amity and commerce in May 1882, the present relationship between the two nations began when Japan was defeated in August 1945. The United States and the Soviet Union hastily agreed to divide the Korean peninsula into two zones of occupation for the purpose of accepting the surrender of Japanese forces and maintaining security until Korea’s future course as an independent nation could be settled. When American forces commanded by Lieutenant General John R. Hodge arrived in Korea in September 1945, they were enthusiastically welcomed as liberators. Americans occupied their zone below the 38th parallel and established the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). The USAMGIK, more exactly the United States, was everything to South Koreans, because it was the only government in the southern zone of Korea.

During the ensuing three years of American military government, the United States played a decisive role in the independence and formation of the Republic of Korea. The momentous period determined the features of subsequent South Korean society. The political, social, and economic phenomena of present-day Korea actually evolved from this three-year period.

South Korea and the United States have maintained close and friendly relations since the summer of 1948 when the former finally became a sovereign state. The United States assisted South Korea fully in protecting its fragile security and rehabilitating its poverty-stricken economy. Although nominally bilateral after America recognized the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1948, the relationship was actually unilateral. The United States, as the patron, made decisions; and South Korea, as the client nation, had to live with those decisions on the level of military support and the content and magnitude of economic assistance.