Paul O’Neill: Today we turn our attention to naval warfare and the 16th century war between Japan and Korea. And a commander whose exploits are far less known in the west than their brilliance deserves; Admiral Yi Sun-sin (1545 to 1598). And I think it is hard to overstate his admiralship and impact. As Royal Naval Vice Admiral Ballard (a former director of Naval Intelligence and director of Operations for the Admiralty War Staff) states about Admiral Yi.

"It's always difficult for an Englishman to admit Nelson ever had an equal in his profession, but if any man is entitled to be so regarded, it should surely be this great naval commander ... who never knew defeat and died in the presence of the enemy... No commander, on the sea at least, ever more thoroughly justified Napoleon’s saying that 'war is an affair not of men, but of a man'."

While Admiral Yi is widely known and admired in his region, there is remarkably little information about him in English, which is why we are absolutely delighted to have Lieutenant Commander Dr. Seok Yeong-dal with us today. He teaches naval history and strategy at the Republic of Korea Naval Academy. His PhD, from Yonsei University in Seoul, examined the successes and limitations of the Royal Navy's reforms in the 19th century.

He has written extensively on Admiral Yi and also the Royal Navy in the 19th century with his recent book, *A Failed Reform or The First Steps of Reforms: achievements and Limitations of the Royal Navy's Reforms in the 19th Century*, published in Korea in 2023. Professor Seok is speaking to us in a private capacity as an academic, and his comments are his alone and not those of the Republic of Korea Navy, the Naval Academy, or the Ministry of Defence.

Yeong-dal, welcome and thank you so much for joining us today.

Seok Yeong-dal: Thank you so much for having me on the RUSI podcast. It is truly an honour to be here.
Paul O'Neill: Yeong-dal, could you tell us a bit about the status that Admiral Yi has within Korean society?

Seok Yeong-dal: Admiral Yi is the legendary hero in Korea and in the Korean Navy. So, in the centre of our capital city, Seoul, there is a very, very big statue of Admiral Yi. So, every Korean walking in the street will gaze at the statue. And many ceremonies in our navy relate to Admiral Yi. So, he is the national hero in Korea.

Paul O'Neill: For those of us who are less familiar with his fantastic achievements, can you tell us a bit about his legacy, particularly as the commander of Korean naval forces against the Hideyoshi regime’s invading Japanese forces of the 16th century?

Seok Yeong-dal: There are various interpretations among historians regarding the reasons why Japan initiated the Imjin War against the Joseon (the former name for Korea). After Japan achieved unification under a central authority, a power struggle arose among local feudal lords called the Daimyo. To ensure stability in their rule, Japan directed the military might of these Daimyo towards external conquests, even to China. This led to the Imjin War against Joseon in 1592.

During the Imjin War, Joseon was ill-prepared to confront the Japanese forces. The political strife within the Korean cabinet hindered their preparation for a foreign invasion, and only a handful of visionary leaders recognized the impending Japanese threat and made preparations accordingly. Especially Joseon's military, which heavily relied on bows, spears, and cavalry, proved to be inferior to the Japanese army equipped with rifles. If there had been smooth and continuous supplies and reinforcements from Japan through the sea, Joseon might have surrendered swiftly to Japan, and the Japanese army would have advanced all the way to China.

However, Admiral Yi Sun-sin, a remarkable figure who prepared and trained the Joseon naval forces of that time, changed the course of the war. Through his brilliant strategies and resolute determination, Admiral Yi gained control of the seas, cutting off the Japanese army's supplies and reinforcements. This left the Japanese forces trapped in Joseon. Ultimately, Admiral Yi Sun-sin's presence shattered Japan's determination to occupy Joseon and invade China, thereby altering the trajectory of East Asian history in the late 16th century.

Paul O'Neill: Could you tell us a bit about his early life and career, and what it was about that that shaped him into such a brilliant commander that you have described?

Seok Yeong-dal: According to anecdotal evidence, Admiral Yi Sun-sin played war games with his friends during his youth in the mountains and fields, displaying excellent leadership. So, he was recognized as an excellent commander for the future in his neighborhood. As a young man, he pursued the civil service examination, a common path for youth during the Joseon Dynasty. This upbringing nurtured him into a man of letters and a learned admiral, like all good commanders in history.

In the Joseon Dynasty, the exams for military officers were not only practical exams for riding horses, shooting bows etc, but also theoretical knowledge tests with books
called *Mugyeong Chilseo*, it means ‘Seven Military Classics’; which were the mandatory reading list for military officers.

And in the Joseon Dynasty, once an officer passed the military officer selection exams, there was no distinction between the positions of an army officer and a naval officer. So, Yi Sun-sin served as an army officer when he was an entry-level officer, where he excelled in the border areas and gained a lot of recognition from his superiors and was promoted. And what is interesting here is that once he became a mid-level officer, he was mainly appointed to positions related to the navy. This was a great fortune for Admiral Yi and the Joseon Dynasty, as it provided him with ample opportunities to improve his ability in preparation for future wars.

During these promotions, Yi Sun-shin's upright character earned him the dislike of some of his superiors. He steadfastly refused inappropriate favours, which led to his demotion in rank. His upright character also had a lot to do with the fact that he was court-martialled twice. However, Yi had a great patron who helped him overcome these negative external pressures and jealous gazes. Yu Seong-ryong [1542-1607] was a friend of Yi's older brother and a brilliant statesman of the Joseon Dynasty. Yu Seong-ryong, who observed Yi's growth from childhood to adulthood, held a position similar to today's Minister of the Interior during the Imjin War. Recognizing Yi's brilliance as a strategist, commander, and a man of great character, Yu Seong-ryong persuaded the King of Joseon to grant Yi an extraordinary promotion to the position of Fleet Commander (*Jeonlajwasusa*). This patronage was instrumental in shaping Yi into the heroic figure he would become, as it provided the opportunity for his ability to shine.

**Paul O'Neill:** Thank you. You mentioned that he played war games as a child. Was the Korea of that era a very martial society, where it was expected that people would go into the armed forces?

**Seok Yeong-dal:** In the Joseon Dynasty, a common task for youth is the civil service examination, as the first (preferred) option. And the second option is a military officer. So, a military officer is not the first option in the Joseon Dynasty, but it is a really good option for becoming high class in the society.

**Paul O'Neill:** Admiral Yi was noted for how well he prepared his troops on the border forts. Was this unusual, this sense of professionalism, and is that what prompted the jealousy of him that resulted in the courts-martials you have spoken about? Or was it just that he was particularly dedicated?

**Seok Yeong-dal:** First of all, his upright character clashed with his superiors. He denied and refused the inappropriate favours, so, he got jealous gazes from his superiors.

**Paul O'Neill:** What were the border forts defending against? Was it from China, from the north?
Seok Yeong-dal: In the early part of Yi Sun-sin’s career he wasn’t guarding against the Ming Dynasty but against different forces on the outskirts of China known as the Jurchens, ‘Yeojinjok’ in Korean. It’s a different country.

Paul O’Neill: You mentioned the Seven Military Classics that was required reading for military officers of the time. Who were the strategists influencing them?

Seok Yeong-dal: During the Joseon Dynasty, the selection exams for military officers required mastery of the theoretical books known as Mugyeong Chilseo (the Seven Military Classics). These books, written by renowned strategists from ancient China, had a significant influence on the strategic thinking of the Joseon Dynasty. These books included: Sun Tzu’s The Art of War,¹ Six Secret Teachings [Jiang Ziya], Three Strategies [Huang Shigong], Wuzi [Wu Qi], The Methods of the Sima [also known as Sima Rangju Art of War], Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong.² These texts were essential for aspiring military officers to study and master in order to excel in their careers.

Yi Sun-sin also not only possessed the practical skills but also exhibited unparalleled strategic knowledge gained from studying those books and other various military strategy and history books. Furthermore, Admiral Yi displayed a continuous thirst for knowledge by actively seeking out and studying the latest tactical texts. Even before the Imjin War, he acquired and diligently examined the most current military manuals from China, engaging in late-night discussions with his subordinates to deepen his understanding.

Beatrice Heuser: It is very notable, therefore, that Admiral Yi started as a land warfare specialist, i.e., a captain, then a general, and that he then seems to apply his skills to naval tactics.

Paul O’Neill: His two most famous battles both seem to have ideas in them that might be recognisable to an army officer.

So, in the Battle of Hansan Island in 1592, he uses this Crane Wing Formation to virtually destroy the Japanese Fleet, and that seems to be rather like a flanking move that allows all of his ships to bring their fire to bear on the enemy while preventing a larger fleet from doing the same in case they hit their own ships. And it also interferes with the ability of the Japanese to conduct boarding operations - the most common form of naval warfare in that period - but of course flanking is more often recognised as an army manoeuvre.

Later on then, in the Battle of Myeongryang [1597], he uses terrain – if I can use that term - his knowledge of the tidal currents, the coast, coupled with the feint of retreat

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¹ Talking Strategy, Season 2, Episode 1. Classical Chinese Strategic Thought: Sunzi, with Dr Peter Lorge.
(a tactic used by Subotai\(^3\) a few centuries earlier) to lure a much stronger Japanese Fleet to defeat. To what extent do you think his naval strategy was shaped by his early career in the army?

**Seok Yeong-dal:** In the art of artillery, tactics like flanking manoeuvres are naturally applicable to both the army and navy; Yi Sun-sin, having studied various military strategies and gained experience in battles, would have instinctively internalized these tactics, regardless of whether he was serving in the army or navy.

Considering Yi Sun-sin’s study of classical and contemporary military texts and his practical experience as a young army officer on the borderlands, it is evident that he would have been influenced by similar strategic thinking. This is reminiscent of how naval and army strategists often draw inspiration from each other’s tactics and principles, like many strategists this podcast already introduced. Yi Sun-sin’s endeavours from reading military manuals and military strategy and history books to applying those principles in real-life combat likely shaped his strategic acumen, making him a formidable naval commander.

The naval battle of Myeongryang, as you mentioned, also exhibits historical parallels with earlier strategies, such as Subotai’s deceptive strategy or Themistocles’ use of terrain in the Battle of Salamis to gain a tactical advantage. These historical similarities emphasize the enduring importance of studying warfare and strategy, as the underlying principles remain consistent over time, despite advancements in weapons.

**Paul O’Neill:** Yeong-dal I wonder when we turn to his naval battles, if you could give us some indication just of the difference in scale of the forces at Admiral Yi’s disposal compared to those of the Hideyoshi regime. Because he is never defeated, as we heard in my introduction from Admiral Ballard. But the scale of the triumphs he has achieved against vastly superior forces is quite staggering. Could you just give us a bit more about the balance of power between the forces that he has available to him and those that the Hideyoshi regime are able to put up as their fleet?

**Seok Yeong-dal:** The number of the ships or the size of the fleet was a little similar, but, after the second court-martial of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, another admiral [Won Gyun, 1540-1597] lost the fleet. So, Admiral Yi had just 12 ships to confront more than 100 ships of Japan.

There is a famous saying by Admiral Yi Sun-sin that resonates with me deeply - it holds a significant place in the discussions within the Korean Navy – ‘Geum-sin-jeon-seon Sang-yu-sip-yi’, it means ‘I still have 12 ships left’ in English. After the second court-martial, he was left with only a very small number of warships, just 12. It epitomizes his unwavering determination during the Battle of Myeongryang, where he faced a daunting adversary. Admiral Yi’s deep understanding of the sea’s importance and the realization that surrendering naval defence would lead to defeat fuelled his

\(^3\) Talking Strategy, Season 4, Episode 1, Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Kahn’s Master Strategist, with Dr Angelo Caravaggio.
resolve to fight against all odds. We easily find this kind of endeavours from many naval strategists, Alfred Thayer Mahan⁴, Julian Corbett⁵, etc.

Paul O'Neill: And these 12 ships, are these the ones that are in the Battle of Myeongryang?

Seok Yeong-dal: Yeah.

Paul O'Neill: But they are reinforced then by Chinese ships as well, aren't they? Because I think the Chinese are engaged in the battle of Noryang, and Admiral Yi comes to their aid at one point, is that correct?

Seok Yeong-dal: Yeah, that's right.

Paul O'Neill: Why did the Chinese join forces with the Joseon Dynasty, and how much support did they provide?

Seok Yeong-dal: The Ming Dynasty of China joined forces with Joseon because they believed that keeping Joseon’s Dynasty safe would also ensure their own security. In this context, the Ming Dynasty offered support to Joseon, but not actively and only lukewarmly, aiming to preserve their military strength. They even dispatched naval forces relatively late in the war, participating only in the final naval battle known as the Battle of Noryang [1598].

Paul O'Neill: The tactics used by Yi Sun-sin and Drake [Sir Francis Drake, 1540-1596] are quite similar and only four years apart. Is there any suggestion of a flow of information between East and West, or are these tactics and strategies being developed independently, but are similar because the circumstances appear similar?

Seok Yeong-dal: That is a fascinating point to consider. When I teach my midshipmen about global naval warfare at the Korean Naval Academy, one of the intriguing aspects is the parallel between Admiral Francis Drake’s victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 and Admiral Yi Sun-sin’s triumph over the Japanese fleet using artillery in the naval battle [Hansan Island, 1592] just four years apart.

In this sense, I believe that this era around the late 16th century seems to mark a significant shift in naval history, transitioning from traditional shipboard hand-to-hand combat to a new paradigm of naval artillery warfare. So, they hindered the adversary coming to close distance for hand-to-hand fight. I think this is the paradigm change of naval history.

⁴ Talking Strategy, Season 2, Episode . Alfred Thayer Mahan: Neptune’s Prophet, with Lieutenant Commander Benjamin Armstrong USN.
⁵ Talking Strategy, Season 1, Episode 1, Sir Julian Corbett and the British Way of War, with Professor Andrew Lambert.
Paul O'Neil: And is there any suggestion that they were learning from each other, or do you think these were just developed entirely independently?

Seok Yeong-dal: I don't think so. I think the artillery's ability is improved similarly in that time. So, they can use the artillery in naval warfare. But I don't think they influence each other.

Beatrice Heuser: So, it seems to me that in parallel, English and Spanish seafarers and Korean seafarers are discovering what you can do with ships at more or less the same time with similar technology emerging.

That includes that you can preclude the invasion of land by actually fighting it off at sea. Nevertheless, there seems to be something very specific to what we see in these battles of Admiral Yi and the very specific thing is these turtle ships. If I understand it correctly, the turtle ships are special because they prevent invasion by boarding.

Could you just describe the ships to us a little bit more in detail?

Seok Yeong-dal: As an innovator Admiral Yi upgraded the traditional warship (Panokseon) and designed a ground-breaking weapon called the turtle ship (Geobukson).

There are some misconceptions about the turtle ship. Firstly, some have referred to it as the first iron-clad in the world, however, it was primarily constructed from wood and wasn’t entirely encased in iron. Instead, it featured a turtle like wooden shell that fully covered the main deck, with iron spikes driven into the wood shell to prevent the Japanese troops from attempting to board. Since boarding tactics were the primary method employed by the Japanese navy, Admiral Yi aimed to counter this approach. The sailors and artillery systems were shielded within the ship by the wooden shell, and they utilised oars for propulsion, manoeuvring in battle even without favourable winds.

The second misconception is that Admiral Yi did not originally design the turtle ship. In truth the turtle ship was developed in the early fourteenth century, nearly two centuries before the Imjin War. However, Yi Sun-sin’s turtle ship differed in size and design from the traditional ones. So, it is fair to say that Yi Sun-sin designed it for battle inventively. These formidable vessels not only withstood Japanese artillery effectively but also boasted superior fire power. Additionally, they had a mechanism to release smoke for enemy confusion. In this respect the turtle ships were enough to strike fear into the Japanese Navy.

Paul O'Neil: So how has his reputation been shaped in the West and how fair is that as a characterization, do you think?

Seok Yeong-dal: First of all it seems that in the West, Yi Sun-sin is not as well-known as Koreans might think. This is something I often sense when I engage in discussion with Western scholars. But when exploring Western reputation and research about Yi Sun-sin, we cannot avoid discussing the issue of appropriation.
An American missionary to Korea, named Homer Herbert, who published the first Korean history book in English, seems to have included his own interests and admiration in such descriptions. Through his writing, it seems that Yi Sun-sin's role as a naval strategist and commander, was properly introduced to the West for the first time.

However, George Alexander Ballard, wrote a book in 1921 *The Influence of the Sea on the Political History of Japan*. It was a cautionary tale about Japan's growth as a naval power. In this book he highlighted Admiral Yi Sun-sin often compared to British hero Nelson [Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, 1758-1805]. I think this analogy served multiple purposes. Of course, notably paying tribute to Admiral Yi's extraordinary achievements, it also aimed to highlight an astonishing historic effect from that era: Japan which had emerged as the dominant naval power in East Asia by the early 1920s, had been defeated by the small nation like Joseon in the late sixteenth century.

In this book Ballard consistently portrays Korea in a negative light.' He even goes so far to claim that "Koreans have proved themselves to be quite incapable of setting up any stable form of government of their own." However, he consistently described only one Korean person, Admiral Yi, as a British-like figure. This appears to be an appropriation to suggest that a relatively small nation like Joseon could have defeated Japan thanks to the presence of a British-like hero. Ballard portrays Admiral Yi as sharing traits with figures such as Nelson and Admiral Fisher [Admiral of the Fleet Baron John Fisher, 1841-1920], even though they belong to much later periods. It seems Ballard aimed to depict Admiral Yi as if he possessed British virtues.

Of course, despite this appropriation, it is thanks to someone like Ballard writing about Admiral Yi's great achievements that the West is interested in Admiral Yi. I think that many researchers, including myself, need to work harder to make sure that Admiral Yi is properly recognized and appreciated in the West.

**Paul O'Neill**: So, could you tell us a little bit about Admiral Yi's death please?

**Seok Yeong-dal**: There is a very different historical analysis about Admiral Yi's death, but usually historians say Admiral Yi was in the Battle of Noryang. He died in the middle of battle. He said, "*Please don't notice my death to my subordinates because if they know they could be distracted*". So, he didn't want his subordinates to know of his death. He was shot by a sniper, so he died like Nelson, and many people, especially in Korea, compare Admiral Yi to Nelson because they had very similar deaths.

**Beatrice Heuser**: His death is also reminiscent of that of Admiral De Ruyter of the Netherlands.⁶

**Seok Yeong-dal**: That's right.

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Paul O'Neill: My final question for you then, Yeong-dal, is what do you think his continued relevance is for commanders today?

Seok Yeong-dal: The sentiment regarding Yi Sun-sin's achievements, mentioned thus far, resonates strongly with present naval officers, who possess significantly greater resources, weapons, and manpower than in his time. Even though few countries would be content with their navy's current capabilities now, Admiral Yi's willingness to defend his country with just 12 ships serves as a reminder that preserving peace and security is of paramount importance, regardless of the resources available.

Despite facing personal dissatisfaction and bitterness, Admiral Yi prioritized his responsibility and duty to his nation during times of war. This illustrates the gravity of being a commander and the necessity of sacrifice for the greater good. And Admiral Yi's tireless efforts are truly commendable. Instead of merely fulfilling his assigned duties, he dedicated himself to enhancing the weapons and devised the revolutionary turtle ship, giving him a crucial advantage in the war.

His disciplined troop management, rigorous self-assessment, and meticulous evaluation of his subordinates' training and equipment showcased his extraordinary commitment. These endeavours stemmed from his sense of patriotism and duty, but they also reveal the willpower and dedication required to turn aspirations into reality. It emphasizes that 'genius strategists' are not merely born, but rather, they are crafted through hard work and dedication. This realization makes the Talking Strategy podcast all the more meaningful.

Paul O'Neill: Yeong-dal, thank you so much for a really fascinating insight into this Admiral who is hugely impressive and very well known in Korea, but doesn't have the reputation that his brilliance deserves. Just his impact on the Korean strategy; to resist the invasion of the Hideyoshi regime where the Korean army is struggling, so he leads a kind of strangulation strategy by attacking sea lines of communication that weakens the superior Japanese land forces and allows Korea to triumph. I think this is amazing given it happens centuries before we see Corbett write about this kind of thing from the British context.

So, thank you so much for joining us. It has been a real pleasure to have you on the programme.

Seok Yeong-dal: Thank you for having me and it was a great experience for me.

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Further Reading

James Murdoch: *A History of Japan: During the Century of Early Foreign Intercourse (1542-1651)*, The office of the "Chronicle", 1903.
