

Korean War: A Fresh Perspective, by Harry G. Sommers, Jr.,

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Dismissed as the 'forgotten war,' Korea was in actuality one of America's most significant conflicts. Although born of a misapprehension, the Korean War triggered the buildup of U.S. forces in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), began American involvement in the Vietnam War, and, although seen as an aberration at the time, now serves as the very model for America's wars of the future.

One reason the importance of the Korean War is not better appreciated is that from the very start the conflict presented confusing and contradictory messages. Historian and Korean War combat veteran T.R. Fehrenbach wrote in his classic *This Kind of War*: 'Americans in 1950 rediscovered something that since Hiroshima they had forgotten: you may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it, and wipe it clean of life—but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground the way the Roman legions did, by putting your young men into the mud.'

Fehrenbach concluded: 'By April 1951, the Eighth Army had again proven Erwin Rommel's assertion that American troops knew less but learned faster than any fighting men he had opposed. The tragedy

of American arms, however, is that having an imperfect sense of history, Americans sometimes forget as quickly as they learn.' Those words proved to be only too true.

Two years later, as the war came to an end, Air Force Secretary Thomas K. Finletter declared that 'Korea was a unique, never-to-be-repeated diversion from the true course of strategic air power.' For the next quarter century, nuclear weaponry dominated U.S. military strategy. As a result, General Maxwell D. Taylor, the Eighth Army's last wartime commander (and later chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War), complained that 'there was no thoroughgoing analysis ever made of the lessons to be learned from Korea, and later policy makers proceeded to repeat many of the same mistakes.'

The most damning mistake those policy-makers made was to misjudge the true nature of the war. As Karl von Clausewitz, the renowned Prussian philosopher of war, wrote in 1832: 'The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and the commander has to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking....This is the first of all strategic questions and the most important.'

As President Harry S. Truman's June 27, 1950, war message makes evident, the U.S. assumption was that monolithic world communism, directed by Moscow, was behind the North Korean invasion. 'The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt,' said Truman, 'that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war.'

That belief, later revealed as false, had enormous and far-reaching consequences. Believing that Korea was a diversion and that the main attack would come in Europe, the United States began a major expansion of its NATO forces. From 81,000 soldiers and one infantry division stationed in Western Europe when the war started, by 1952 the U.S. presence had increased to six divisions—including the National Guard's 28th and 43rd Infantry divisions—503 aircraft, 82 warships and 260,800 men, slightly more than the 238,600 soldiers then in combat in Korea.

Another critical action was the decision to become involved in Vietnam. In addition to ordering U.S. military forces to intervene in Korea, Truman directed 'acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France and the Associated States in Indo-China and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close working relations with those forces.'

On September 17, 1950, Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Indochina was formed, an organization that would grow to the half-million-strong Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) before U.S. involvement in that country came to an end almost a quarter century later. As in Korea, the notion that monolithic world communism was behind the struggle persisted until almost the very end.

The fact that such an assumption was belied by 2,000 years of Sino-Vietnamese hostility was ignored, and it was not until Richard Nixon's diplomatic initiatives in 1970 that the United States became aware of, and began to exploit, the fissures in that so-called Communist monolith. By then it was too late, for the American people had long since given up on Vietnam.

The fact that the U.S. response to both the Korean War and the Vietnam War was built on the false perception of a Communist monolith began to emerge after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. At a July 1995 conference I attended at Georgetown University, Dr. Valeri Denissov, deputy director of the Asian Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, revealed the true nature of the Korean War's origins.

Drawing from the hitherto secret documents of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Denissov revealed that far from being the instigator of the war, Soviet Premier Josef

Stalin was at best a reluctant partner. In September 1949, the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party rejected an appeal from North Korea's Kim Il Sung to assist in an invasion of the South. But in April 1950, says Denissov, Stalin changed his mind and agreed to provide assistance for an invasion of the South. For one thing, Kim had convinced Stalin that the invasion was a low-risk operation that could be successfully concluded before the United States could intervene.

'Thus,' said Denissov, 'the documents existing in Russian archives prove that...it was Kim Il Sung who unleashed the war upon receiving before-hand blessings from Stalin and Mao Zedong [Mao Tse-tung].'

Why did Stalin change his mind? The first reason lay in Mao Tse-tung's victory in the Chinese Third Civil War. Denissov asserted that 'Stalin believed that after the U.S.A. deserted Chiang Kai-shek 'to his own fortunes' in the internal Chinese conflict they would not risk a participation in a Korean-Korean war as well.' Another factor, Denissov believed, was that 'the Soviet Union had declared the creation of its own nuclear bomb, which according to Stalin's calculations deprived Americans of their nuclear monopoly and of their ability to use the 'nuclear card' in the confrontation with the Soviet Union.'

Another Russian Foreign Ministry official at the conference, Dr. Evgeny Bajanov,

added yet another reason for Stalin's change of heart—the 'perceived weakness of Washington's position and of its will to get involved militarily in Asia.'

That perception was well-founded. Dispatched to Korea at the end of World War II to disarm the Japanese there, the U.S. military was not too fond of the country from the start. When I arrived at the replacement depot at Yongdungpo in November 1947, our group was addressed by Lt. Gen. John R. Hodge, commander of the XXIV Corps and of U.S. forces in Korea. 'There are only three things the troops in Japan are afraid of,' he said. 'They're gonorrhoea, diarrhoea and Korea. And you've got the last one.'

After a year with the 6th Infantry Division in Pusan—a time spent mostly confined to barracks because of the civil unrest then sweeping the country—I was only too glad to see the division deactivated in December 1948 and myself transferred to the 24th Infantry Division in Japan. In 1949, the 7th Infantry Division, the only remaining U.S. combat unit in Korea, was also transferred to Japan, leaving only the several hundred men of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG).

'In Moscow,' Denissov said, 'American military presence in South Korea in 1945-1949 was viewed as a 'detering factor' which became defunct after America's withdrawal from the South.' Yet another

sign of lack of American will was Secretary of State Dean Acheson's public statement in January 1950 that Korea was outside the U.S. defense perimeter in Asia. Finally, Moscow must have been well aware of the drastic cuts made in America's defenses by the false economies of Truman and Louis Johnson, his feckless secretary of defense.

While Stalin's and Kim Il Sung's perceptions of U.S. lack of resolve may have been well-founded, they were also wrong. During a Pentagon briefing in 1974, General Vernon Walters, then deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was asked about the unpredictability of U.S. reaction. 'If a Soviet KGB spy had broken into the Pentagon or the State Department on June 25, 1950, and gained access to our most secret files,' Walters said, 'he would have found the U.S. had no interest at all in Korea. But the one place he couldn't break into was the mind of Harry Truman, and two days later America went to war over Korea.'

In taking the United States to war in Korea, Truman made two critical decisions that would shape future military actions. First, he decided to fight the war under the auspices of the United Nations, a pattern followed by President George Bush in the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and, currently, by President Bill Clinton in Bosnia. Second, for the first time in American military history, Truman decided to take the nation to war without first asking Congress for a

declaration of war. Using the U.N. Security Council resolution as his authority, he said the conflict in Korea was not a war but a 'police action.'

With the Soviet Union then boycotting the U.N. Security Council, the United States was able to gain approval of U.N. resolutions labeling the North Korean invasion a 'breach of the peace' and urging all members to aid South Korea.

The United States was named executive agent for the conduct of the war, and on July 10, 1950, Truman appointed General of the Army Douglas MacArthur as commander in chief of the U.N. Command. In reality, however, the U.N. involvement was a facade for unilateral U.S. action to protect its vital interests in northeast Asia. The U.N. Command was just another name for MacArthur's Far East Command in Tokyo.

At its peak strength in July 1953, the U.N. Command stood at 932,539 ground forces. Republic of Korea (ROK) army and marine forces accounted for 590,911 of that force, and U.S. Army and Marine forces for another 302,483. By comparison, other U.N. ground forces totaled some 39,145 men, 24,085 of whom were provided by British Commonwealth Forces (Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) and 5,455 of whom came from Turkey.

While the U.N. facade was a harmless delusion, Truman's decision not to seek a declaration of war set a dangerous precedent. Claiming their war making authority rested in their power as commanders in chief, both Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon refused to ask Congress for approval to wage war in Vietnam, a major factor in undermining support for that conflict. It was not until the Gulf War in 1991 that then President Bush rejected suggestions that he follow the Korean precedent and instead, as the Constitution provides, asked Congress for permission to wage war.

All those political machinations, however, were far from the minds of those of us then on occupation duty in Japan. We were as surprised as Stalin and Kim Il Sung at Truman's orders to go into action in Korea. For one thing, we were far from ready. I was then a corporal with the 24th Infantry Division's heavy tank battalion, only one company of which was activated—and that unit was equipped not with heavy tanks but with M-24 Chaffee light reconnaissance tanks, armed with low-velocity 75mm guns, that proved to be no match for the North Koreans' Soviet-supplied T-34 85mm-gun medium tanks.

Also inadequate were the infantry's 2.36-inch anti-tank rocket launchers. Radios did not work properly, and we were critically short of spare parts. Instead of the usual three rifle battalions, the infantry regiments

had only two. And our field artillery battalions had only two of their three authorized firing batteries. Although our officers and sergeants were mostly World War II combat veterans, we were truly a 'hollow force.'

The 24th Infantry Division was the first U.S. ground combat unit committed to the war, with its initial elements landing in Korea on July 1, 1950. We soon found ourselves outgunned by the advancing North Korean People's Army (NKPA). All of our tanks were lost to the NKPA T-34s, and our commander was killed for want of a starter solenoid on our tank retriever. Going into action with some 16,000 soldiers, the 24th Division had only 8,660 men left by the time it was relieved by the 1st Cavalry Division on July 22.

The shock of those initial disasters still reverberates throughout the U.S. Army more than four decades later. After the end of the Cold War in 1991, the watchwords of Army Chief of Staff General Gordon Sullivan were 'Remember Task Force Smith,' a warning not to let the Army again become the hollow force of 1950 that paid in blood for America's unpreparedness.

Task Force Smith was the first of the 24th Infantry Division's units to be committed. Named after its commander, Lt. Col. Charles B. 'Brad' Smith, the task force consisted of the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry, and 'A' Battery, 52nd Field Artillery

Battalion. The task force came under attack by the infantry columns of the NKPA 4th Infantry Division and the T-34s of the 209th Armored Brigade at Osan on July 5, 1950. Outnumbered and unable to stop the NKPA tanks, it was forced to fall back toward Taejon. There, the remainder of the 24th Infantry Division made a stand until July 20, before being pushed back into the Naktong Perimeter—losing the commander, Maj. Gen. William F. Dean (captured by the NKPA), in the process. Although at a terrible price, it had bought time for the remainder of the Eighth U.S. Army (EUSA) to move from Japan to Korea. Contrary to Kim Il Sung's calculations, America had been able to intervene in time. North Korea's attempt to conquer South Korea in one lightning stroke had been thwarted.

Wars are fought on three interconnected levels. At first, the United States was on the operational (i.e., theater of war) and tactical (i.e., battlefield) defensive, but at the strategic (i.e., national policy) level, it was still pursuing the same policy of 'rollback and liberation' that it had followed in earlier wars. That policy called for temporarily going on the defensive to buy time to prepare for a strategic offensive that would carry the war to the enemy in order to destroy his will to resist.

While EUSA held the Naktong River line against a series of North Korean assaults, General MacArthur laid plans to assume

the strategic, operational and tactical offensive with a landing behind enemy lines at Inchon.

In a brilliant strategic maneuver, MacArthur sent his X Corps ashore on September 15, 1950. Consisting of the Army's 7th Infantry Division and the Marine 1st Division, it rapidly cut the enemy's lines of supply and communication to its forces besieging the Naktong Perimeter to the south, forcing them to withdraw in disarray. While X Corps pressed on to recapture Seoul, South Korea's capital city, EUSA broke out of the Naktong Perimeter and linked up with X Corps near Osan on September 26. Seoul fell the next day.

'After the Inchon landing,' Secretary of State Acheson told the Senate in May 1951, 'General MacArthur called on these North Koreans to turn in their arms and cease their efforts; that they refused to do, and they retired into the North, and what General MacArthur's military mission was, was to pursue them and round them up [and] we had the highest hopes that when you did that the whole of Korea would be unified.'

On Korea's western coast, EUSA crossed the 38th parallel dividing North and South Korea and captured the North Korean capital of Pyongyang on October 19, 1950. EUSA continued to drive north against light opposition, and on November 1, 1950, it

reached its high-water mark when the village of Chongdo-do, 18 air miles from the Yalu River separating Korea and the Chinese province of Manchuria, was captured by the 21st Infantry Regiment.

Meanwhile, on the opposite coast, X Corps had moved into northeastern Korea. The 1st Marine Division occupied positions around the Chosin Reservoir, while on November 21, elements of the Army's 7th Infantry Division's 17th Infantry Regiment reached the Yalu River near its source at Hyesanjin in eastern Korea. It seemed as though the war was over.

But disaster was at hand. On October 4, 1950, Chairman Mao Tse-tung had secretly ordered 'Chinese People's Volunteers' into action in Korea. Those Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) consisted of some 380,000 soldiers, organized into two army groups, nine corps-size field armies and 30 infantry divisions.

From October 13 to 25, the 130,000-man CCF XIII Army Group covertly crossed the Yalu River in the western sector opposite EUSA. Two weeks later, the 120,000-man CCF IX Army Group also moved surreptitiously into the eastern sector in Korea, opposite X Corps. Because of intelligence failures, both in Washington and in Korea, the Chinese managed to achieve almost total surprise. Their intervention would change not only the

battlefield conduct of the war but also its strategic nature.

According to the Soviet archives, in May 1950, Mao had agreed to join with the Soviet Union and support the North Korean invasion of South Korea. As the Russian Foreign Ministry's Evgeny Bajanov noted at the 1995 Georgetown conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Chou En-lai 'confirmed [on July 2, 1950] that if the Americans crossed the 38th parallel, Chinese troops disguised as Koreans would engage the opponent' and that Chinese armies had already been concentrated in the area of Mukden in Manchuria. 'In August-September 1950 on a number of occasions,' said Bajanov, 'Mao personally expressed concerns over the escalation of American military intervention in Korea and reiterated the readiness of Beijing to send troops to the Korean peninsula 'to mince' American divisions.' But when Stalin sent a message to Mao on October 1, asking him to 'come to the rescue of the collapsing Kim regime,' Mao refused, instead suggesting 'the Koreans should accept defeat and resort to guerrilla tactics.'

Under intense Soviet pressure, however, on October 13, 'the Chinese, after long deliberation, did agree to extend military aid to North Korea,' said Bajanov. 'Moscow in exchange agreed to arm the Chinese troops and provide them with air cover. According to the available information, it was not easy for Beijing to adopt that

military decision. Pro-Soviet Gao Gang and Peng Dehuai [who would later command the CCF in Korea] finally managed to convince Mao to take their side. Their main argument was that if all of Korea was occupied by the Americans, it would create a mortal danger to the Chinese revolution.'

In any event, after feints in early November against EUSA at Unsan and against X Corps at Sudong, both of which were ignored by Far East Command intelligence officers, the CCF launched its main attack. On November 25, the XIII Army Group struck the EUSA, driving it out of North Korea and retaking Seoul on January 4, 1951. Meanwhile, on November 27, the CCF IX Army Group struck X Corps, and by December 25, 1950, had forced its evacuation from North Korea as well.

At first, both Moscow and Beijing were elated. On January 8, 1951, Bajanov reported, Stalin cabled Mao, 'From all my heart I congratulate Chinese comrades with the capture of Seoul.' But Bajanov added, 'By the end of January 1951...the euphoria of Communists started to decline and quite soon it disappeared and was replaced with worries, fear, confusion and at times panic.'

What made the difference was Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, who took command of EUSA on December 26, 1950, replacing Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker, who had been killed in a jeep accident. Ridgway turned EUSA from dejection and defeat into a

tough, battle-ready force within a matter of weeks. 'The Eighth Army,' wrote Fehrenbach, 'rose from its own ashes in a killing mood....By 7 March they stood on the Han. They went through Seoul, and reduced it block by block....At the end of March, the Eighth Army was across the parallel.'

Attempting to stem that tide, on April 22, 1951, the CCF launched its great spring offensive, sending some 250,000 men and 27 divisions into the attack along a 40-mile front north of Seoul. It was the largest battle of the war, but by May 20 the CCF, after some initial gains, had been turned back with terrible losses. As Time magazine put it, 'The U.S. expended ammunition the way the Chinese expended men.' After that success, the United States was in good position to retake the offensive and sweep the CCF from Korea. But Washington ordered EUSA to maintain its defensive posture, for U.S. military policy had changed from rollback and liberation to containment. That ruled out battlefield victory, for the best possible result of defensive operations is stalemate.

On July 10, 1951, armistice talks began between the U.N. Command and the CCF/NKPA. After the front line stabilized in November 1951, along what was to become the new demarcation line, the fighting over the next 20 months degenerated into a bloody battle for terrain features like Old Baldy, Heartbreak Ridge

and Pork Chop Hill. The U.S. forces suffered some 63,200 casualties to gain or retain those outposts. With victory no longer in sight, public support for the war plummeted, and in 1952 Truman decided not to run for re-election rather than risk almost certain defeat. With the signing of the armistice agreement on July 27, 1953, the war finally came to an end.

Dwarfed by the total U.S. victory in World War II, the negotiated settlement in Korea seemed to many observers to be a defeat and at best a draw. Certainly it seemed no model for the future.

As indicated previously, it was Eisenhower's strategy of massive nuclear retaliation that dominated the immediate postwar era. Conventional forces, like the Korean War itself, were dismissed as irrelevant. Even when the atomic war strategies were challenged by the John F. Kennedy administration's policy of flexible response, conventional forces were still ignored in favor of the 'new' counterinsurgency war. Vietnam would be its test case.

The Vietnam War, like the Korean War, was pursued on the strategic defensive—the United States still not realizing that the best result possible was stalemate. In Korea, U.S. forces kept the external enemy at bay while giving local forces responsibility for counter guerrilla operations. But in

Vietnam, this strategy—the only one with any hope of success—was regarded as ineffective, even though the Korean War objective of preserving South Korea's independence had been attained.

Only in the wake of an unqualified failure in Vietnam, where Saigon fell not to guerrilla attack but to a Korea-style cross-border blitzkrieg by the North Vietnamese army, did the limited validity of both nuclear war and counterinsurgency operations become evident. The most probable future conflict was still a war fought with conventional weapons in pursuit of limited political goals—in short, another Korea.

That was exactly what happened in the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, and what the Pentagon is now prepared for with its policy of being able to fight two regional conflicts almost simultaneously.

One of those potential regional conflicts is Korea. As President Bill Clinton told the Korean National Assembly in July 1993, 'The Korean peninsula remains a vital American interest.' As proof of U.S. resolve, almost a half century after it was decimated at Kunu-ri protecting EUSA's withdrawal from North Korea, the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division currently sits astride the Seoul invasion corridor as a tripwire guaranteeing certain U.S. involvement in any future conflict there.