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THE KOREAN WAR

Which one? When?

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To really understand the nature of the Korean War and to put a human face to the mountains of statistical analysis, it is imperative, as a scholar, to engage with Korean War veterans and other survivors of the conflict and listen to their stories.¹ I am often asked what I have learned about the Korean War, given all the time and energy I have exerted, even taking Korean language lessons. I have even been forgotten by the Korean Language Institute at Yonsei University because I was so miserable at *hangukmal* (Korean Language). From my American perspective, the most important thing is understanding the suffering of the Korean people during the Korean War in the geopolitical context of the interwar period of 1945–50 in north-east Asia. It is also essential that we account for the composition of weapons capabilities on both sides and for the influence of the Korean climate and terrain on the conflict.

First of all, the Korean War did not begin in 1950. It began at least in 1948. One could argue that it started in 1947 or the year before with what is known as the Autumn Harvest Rebellion. Indeed, one could talk

¹ This chapter is based on Allan Millett's presentation at the international military history conference 'Korea: In from the Cold', Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 2011. Millett's remarks reflect his views and expertise outlined in his publications, including *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2005, and *The War for Korea, 1950–1951: They Came from the North*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2010.

about a 'Korean war in the making' by going all the way back to 1 March 1919—the period of a great Korean nationalist protest against the Japanese annexation of 1910. After this unsuccessful protest movement—which was suppressed with a loss of life numbering in the thousands—two kinds of Korean revolutionary movements emerged. It is very difficult to categorise them. Bruce Cumings at the University of Chicago divides the instigators of the rebellion between the good guys—who are almost always socialists—and the bad guys, who are everybody else. This clear-cut differentiation allows for a limited description of the nuances of resistance to the Japanese occupation of Korea. The leaders of the 1919 movement were not communists at all. The Korean Communist Party had not yet been formed: these revolutionaries were involved in lobbying for support at the peace conference in Versailles. The leaders of the 1919 movement produced the nationalistic resistance generation, which continued to be represented by Syngman Rhee, for example, well into the 1950s. And it was a movement that in essence was forced into exile, either in the United States or, more specifically, Hawaii, where Syngman Rhee based himself, or in China, led by Kim Ku, who was the president of the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) in exile. The KPG was closely associated with the Chinese Kuomintang.

Some authors assert that the Americans responsible for interwar and wartime policy of the 1930s and 1940s concerning the Korean peninsula did not know anything about Korean politics. This is simply not true. The problem was that what they knew led them to believe that there was no legitimate exile movement that was worthy of support whenever liberation came. Kim Ku and the provisional government were much too close to the Chinese Nationalists; they seemed to represent the most autocratic and corrupt part of Chinese politics. The United States Department of State had already begun distancing itself from the Chinese Nationalist Party, so anyone associated with it was going to be stained by that association. The State Department was not in love with Syngman Rhee either, whom it had known since the 1920s. He had come in exile to Hawaii and become a lobbyist for Korean nationalism in New York and Washington.

The United States has a habit of picking strange people to back, but Syngman Rhee was not one of them, nor was Kim Ku. If the United States had had a choice, the leadership of liberated Korea would have fallen into the hands of a man named Yo Hon-yong and another named Kim Kyu-sik. They were coffee-house liberals, inept when it came to governing

in a post-colonial environment. It is often said the United States had no plan for Korea. That is true, but not because no one had thought about it. The State Department just did not have anybody whom it thought was worth American support. The one goal the United States had in 1945 was to free Allied prisoners of war, wherever they were, and to repatriate Japanese prisoners as rapidly as it could. The repatriation of the Japanese army and civilians (more than 5 million people abroad) was critical to the restoration and reform of Japan. That is why the United States went to Korea in 1945, a mission accomplished with considerable deftness by December 1945. Then the question facing Lieutenant General John R. Hodge was: what do I do now? It was a good question because nobody had yet told him.

The foreign ministers met in Moscow in early December 1945, and the great powers told General Hodge to prepare for Korean independence. This instruction came without his being offered some plan for how this should be accomplished, particularly now that the Russians were very much in control above the 38th parallel. They had brought with them a number of Korean communists, led by Kim Il Sung. That was not really his name. He called himself that because it was the name of a local hero, like Robin Hood or Jesse James or Ned Kelly. General Paik Sun-yup, very much a hero of mine as he is to many people in Korea, was at a meeting to which the Russians brought Kim Il Sung to meet Cho Man-sik, a prominent Christian liberationist leader in North Korea. A funny little man came in with the Russians and was introduced as Kim Il Sung. And everybody says, 'Who? That's not him'. Cho Man-sik turned to the Paik brothers—both later generals in the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army—and said, 'I think we've got trouble. I think you guys better get out of here. It's obvious that the Russians have chosen him [Kim] and they're going to get us'. And, in fact, Cho died in prison, basically neglected, ignored and killed by the Soviets.

There was an irreconcilable difference between two very broad liberation movements. One was a coalition of communists, some based in China, some based in Russia, and members of the Kapsan faction with Kim Il Sung as their champion. The other was an indigenous communist party, led by Pak Hon-yong. If you are looking for a hero of Korean nationalism and resistance to Japan, and the formation of an indigenous radical movement within Korea, Pak Hon-yong is the man. He did not survive the Korean

War. He was foreign minister and deputy premier of North Korea. He was later accused of working for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and was executed by Kim Il Sung.

After a series of tortuous negotiations, it was clear that there would be no unification between the northern occupied zone and the southern occupied zone. There were, in fact, meetings and negotiations that went on for about a year and a half, but fundamentally there was no way to patch together the two Koreas. One proposal was for up to five years of trusteeship by the Soviet Union, the United States, China and Britain, which many Koreans opposed. To a large degree the Soviets made it unworkable, because their condition—even for negotiations on unifying Korea—was that every party that opposed trusteeship was illegitimate and should not be allowed to participate in the process. That ban included every party except the communist party, which had flip-flopped in January 1946. The South Korean Labor Party, which was the communist party of South Korea, had big signs in English: ‘We’re against trusteeship, no trusteeship’. It was in a coalition against trusteeship. Forty-eight hours later the communists had to get rid of their signs and put up new signs that said, ‘We love trusteeship’. They had got the word from the Soviet legation in Seoul, and the word was that the Soviets thought trusteeship was a good deal. Everybody who opposed trusteeship should be disallowed as a participant in those negotiations.

After some rather considerable discussions within the State Department, the diplomats concluded that this mess should be turned over to the United Nations for solution. In fact, Australian representatives played an important role in what was first known as the UN Temporary Commission on Korea, which then evolved into several other iterations. The United States passed the Korean unification problem to the United Nations in the fall of 1947, and the elections that created the ROK in 1948 were supervised by the United Nations, which could not go north and hold similar elections there.

From a theoretical perspective of people’s wars of national liberation, Korea begins to fit a Maoist Phase 2 uprising, in which one begins to see violent insurgency. The tax protest in the fall of 1946 does not appear to be communist-encouraged, but killed about a thousand people. American soldiers actually shot Koreans at a place called Nowon. The fall of 1946 was a very unpleasant time; there were some very serious divisions in Korea over the nation’s future. In the general strike of 1947, the South

Korean Labour Party went underground and began to organise the foundation for some future insurgency, which was largely pre-empted in the spring of 1948 on the island of Cheju-do (today's Jeju). In any event, a direct conflict broke out there between the South Korean Labour Party and the government, represented by the Korean National Police and Constabulary and American military government advisers.

The war that started on Cheju-do spread to the mainland throughout the summer and fall of 1948. Before 25 June 1950, the casualty estimates run between 30,000 and 100,000 dead. These figures are wildly exaggerated. Counting the dead is a bad business. I was involved in having the figures revised for the American war dead in the Korean War, and we finally persuaded the US Defense Department to admit that it had made an error: 54,000 was not the right number. It was more like 37,000.² The South Korean security forces lost more than 7,200 dead during the insurgency of 1948–50. Their names are on the plaques at the Korean War Memorial in Seoul. How many other people died is difficult to know. I argue it would be 20,000 perhaps. It is a serious number, and it was a horrible conflict. The ROK government, established on 15 August 1948, won that war. By the spring of 1950, the South Korean communist-led insurgency in the south had been largely suppressed.

The nature of the relationship between Pyongyang and the communist insurgency is unknown. We do know that Kim Il Sung and his supporters joined in late 1948–49, because they took South Korean communist exiles who had crossed into North Korea, armed them, trained them, and sent them back. Eleven different efforts were made to return South Korean communists to South Korea to support this insurgency. There is definitely a comparison to be made here with the Vietnam War. Pak Hon-yong had gone north and was helping to direct this civil war by 1949–50. Whether there had been an invasion or not, there would have been a South Korean civil war of some kind. How it would have turned out and how bloody it would have been is subject to historical speculation.

During these years the ROK had become home to a large number of northern Koreans. These northern Koreans were often Christians, landholders, businessmen or other enemies of North Korean communism. Exiles from North Korea became a rock-hard anti-communist foundation within the politics of South Korea. The staunch Christian anti-communist

2 A. Millett, 'Korean War', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/event/Korean-War.

society in South Korea was largely concentrated in the northern areas of the ROK: Kangwon province in the north-east and Kyonggi in the north-west. The radicals were concentrated in the south of the ROK. If this distribution had been reversed, it would have been a really serious problem for the anti-communists. This is because the infiltrators from the north—in order to marry up with the insurgents, who were largely concentrated in the south—had to go all the way down the Taebaeks, the mountain range that runs the length of the east coast. Then they had to find insurgent groups in the Chiri-sans in the lower part of the Taebaek range. That trek was a serious problem for the infiltration effort from the north.

When do the North Koreans enter this war? Pak Hon-yong had joined the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), officially founded in September 1948. He argued that there was still enough of a political base within South Korea for there to be a great uprising if the North Koreans invaded; between the uprising and the invasion, the communist cause would win. Kim Il Sung was convinced of this in 1949 and had drawn up plans to intervene in the civil war in the south. He went to Moscow for aid.

Traditional wisdom has it that this was Kim Il Sung's first trip to Moscow. Once we began to look at Russian documents, made possible through the Woodrow Wilson Center, it was clear that he had been to Russia before. A transcript of his meeting with Stalin in the spring of 1949 contains this event: Stalin looks at him and says, 'I believe you've put on weight. You look a lot fatter than the last time I saw you'. Then the question was: when was that? And it turned out that Kim Il Sung had been to Moscow in 1947, largely because he was lobbying to have printing presses replaced. The printing presses belonged to three communist newspapers in Seoul. They printed newspapers, to be sure, but at the same time were counterfeiting South Korean currency. The military government went in and grabbed the presses. The communists were distressed, so they went off to get more presses. That is why Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong had gone to Moscow. We know they made contact with Stalin. How much happened between that time and 1949 we still do not know.

But in any event, Stalin talked with Kim Il Sung about an invasion, and he said, 'No, not yet'. But Stalin also said: 'Try me again later—but here are the preconditions for my giving you support. The Americans have got to go. Advisers we don't care about, but there's one American regimental combat team, the 5th Regimental Combat Team [RCT], sitting on the

approaches to Seoul.’ Today the road to Seoul is built up, but in those days it was open. And the one American unit left in Korea after the summer of 1948 was sitting right astride that route.

Stalin’s conditions for assisting the DPRK in invading the ROK were threefold: first, the Americans had to go; second, no sign of intervention could be shown; and the DPRK had to reorganise its army, following the return of DPRK soldiers training in Russia to the Korean Peninsula, to fight the ROK Army, which should ideally be underprepared and ill-equipped to stand up to an attack from the DPRK were it to succeed.³

In short, the ROK Army did not defect, and it continued to fight even when its forces were being pushed back towards the Pusan Perimeter. Stalin was requiring all kinds of conditions that were based on the Chinese communist experience. The ROK Army did exactly the opposite. Undergunned, undersupplied, it fought very well. Another of Stalin’s conditions was that the Chinese had to promise to give the North Koreans help of some kind, which in fact the Chinese did. They transferred two whole divisions of Korean troops from the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to the Korean People’s Army (KPA). Other Korean veterans of the PLA (there were tens of thousands) came in as individuals, then served as the backbone of at least two other divisions. So, of the seven North Korean divisions, four came from the Chinese PLA. Some historians have argued that Stalin reluctantly approved the North Korean attack under significant pressure from Kim, who won his case by misrepresenting to Stalin the strength of communist guerrillas in the South who would supposedly rise up and provide North Korea with a quick and easy victory. There is also a continuing debate over whether Kim initiated the North Korean attack alone or whether it was a Soviet plot. Indeed, many historians record that, in 1950, the US Government viewed the Korean War as being an initiative of the Soviets.

A year later—with the American troops gone and some signs that all these other preconditions had either been met or would be met if an invasion began—Stalin gave his approval. We have testimony from North Korean officers who later chose to stay in South Korea of exactly how many tanks came in and how many guns. This is not a great mystery. The two officers

3 ‘Telegram from Tunkin to the Soviet Foreign Ministry in Reply to 11 September Telegram’, 14 September 1949, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, AVP RF, Fond 059a, Opis 5a, Delo 3, Papka 11, listy 46-53, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112132.

who wrote the invasion plan were both Koreans trained by the Soviets. Both of them visited South Korea in their later years and said, 'We don't know what the mystery is. We planned this thing'. The word was out that it was OK to invade.

There is still some debate about the timing of the invasion. The original plan, to the degree that we understand it, called for the invasion to come in August. Now you have to know Korean weather to understand that decision. In late June or early July *changma* begins; this is the rainy season.

Heavy rainfall on the Korean Peninsula is a major military and tactical factor because it is difficult to do armour operations of any kind on the roads, and it is certainly not going to make any kind of air support feasible. The difficulty from the North Korean standpoint was that it looked as if the South Koreans knew there would be an invasion. As a matter of fact, they did. They had infiltrated the North Korean Army and had good intelligence. Many of the Americans of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) agreed that the ROK Army should go on alert in the first two weeks of June; they went off alert because the ROK Army thought that they needed a little break. Two North Korean officers had defected and revealed the plans. There were four South Korean divisions on the front, and unfortunately the two that were in the path of the attack, Paik Sun Yup's 1st Division and Yu Jae Hung's 7th Division, did go on leave. The 6th Division was at Chunchon, right in the middle of the country, and the 8th Division was on the east coast. Neither of their commanders released their troops. They fought good withdrawals down the coast. The invasion had taken place even though it was raining simply because the North Koreans believed that if they did not go then, the ROK Army would get to a higher state of alert. The ROK would get the four divisions that were in the south, fighting the guerrillas, and bring them north; then maybe the Americans might even decide to intervene.

From a broad historical perspective of the Korean War, this 1950 period provides a narration of the key points throughout the duration of the conflict. The North Koreans thought that if they seized Seoul, the South Korean Government and the South Korean Army would collapse. The South Koreans did not capitulate. That came as a very unpleasant surprise, both to their Soviet advisers and to the North Korean leadership. The thing that begins to turn the war, obviously, is the US intervention, but it was not all that easy. The US Eighth Army was not as ill-prepared as it has often been characterised, but it was unprepared enough. There is

no question that UN soldiers—including the ROK Army and the US Army—did not have enough anti-tank weapons until there were medium tanks in theatre, and they got 3.5-inch rocket launchers. The US Air Force (USAF) brought in something like 4,000 3.5-inch rocket launchers and ammunition for them in a period of about eight weeks. By the end of August 1950, the infantry units had a dependable anti-tank weapon. The air force and the US Army actually counted kills of Russian T-34 tanks and came up with almost the same answers. I found this unbelievable. The US Army and US Air Force actually agreed on something. But in fact they found that fewer than half those tanks were destroyed from the air. The others were destroyed by rocket launchers and by artillery and demolitions and other kinds of weapons.

The major military equipment deficit between the UN forces and the communist forces really was not tanks but a disparity in the number of artillery pieces. If you take a look at the engagements, you find that the tanks are a problem; but what really breaks ROK units and breaks up US units is a huge artillery deficit. Divisional artillery was filled out by the fall of 1950, but corps artillery was not in place until the winter of 1951. It took 14 different US National Guard heavy artillery battalions to build a corps artillery component for the allies. The North Koreans had good artillery: it was all Russian, and the North Korean troops were well trained.

Fortunately the weather was not as bad as it might have been. The *changma* rainy seasons in 1951 and 1952 were awful. But in 1950 it was one of the driest *changma* in recorded history. I went through all the records of the Fifth Air Force, and there were only four days, in a period of about three months, in which the air force could not put up at least a hundred sorties. This meant that a road-bound army, which the North Koreans were, was going to be vulnerable to air attack. USAF air attack took out the North Koreans' artillery, as well as counter-battery fire.

The story of the strategic counter-offensive gives too much credit to the Inchon landing to recapture Seoul. Strategically it was an error, because it was the landing that convinced the Chinese that they had to intervene. Critical decisions in China had been made over the nights between 1 and 3 October; then it became a matter of what conditions the Russians and the Chinese would work out between them, not whether or not the Chinese would come into the war. The Russians made a fatal mistake, which Kim Il Sung and others bought. The Russians knew an amphibious

landing was probable, but they decided that, in organising the defences, they would emphasise Wonsan. The Russians said, 'We think they're going to Wonsan'. So that is where they laid all the mines. The Chinese war-gamed the problem and told the North Koreans: 'It's not Wonsan. It's Inchon.' Chai Chengwen, who was head of the PLA military mission to the DPRK, insisted that the Chinese gave good advice to the North Koreans, but the Russians countered it. The US X Corps was lucky that Seoul and the approaches to Inchon were not as well defended as they might have been. It was not United Nations Command's (UNC) crossing of the 38th parallel that became critical; it was the Chinese decision that war had become inevitable that led China to intervene.

I want to shift, however, to what is known as the stalemate period, 1951–53, the armistice negotiations period. This is a neglected area; yet, in some cases, the terrain really counts. Both sides wanted to position themselves in such a way that if the armistice broke down, they would hold key terrain that would allow them to continue the war. The Americans wanted first of all to protect Seoul and all the approaches to Seoul. This meant putting good units—the ROK 1st Division, the Commonwealth Division and the US 1st Marine Division—on the northern approaches to Seoul to make sure that the enemy could not go south if they wanted to. This was basically a strategic defence; it was critical to hold onto the base of the Iron Triangle where it sat across the future Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). The Iron Triangle was located between the towns of Chorwon, Kumwha and Pyongyang; it served as an important Chinese troop concentration area, as well as a critical communications and supply area. Up there on Chorwon is one of the few places in Korea where you can see flat ground; it is a fairly open area with roads that go either north-west to Wonsan or north-east to Pyongyang. So if you are thinking about some future campaign, having access to the Iron Triangle becomes an understandable goal.

From the Chinese and North Korean perspective, the concern remained fear of invasion. In 1951 the Chinese decided they were going to have a fortification building program, which was part of their war of attrition. In about 18 months they had their part of the front well-fortified back to a depth of about 20 miles. The next thing they wanted to do was to create counter-amphibious invasion positions up and down both coasts, and these were not completed until the summer of 1953. I think they

would not have signed an armistice until they were convinced that the North Korean Army was in good shape and that these fortifications were in place.

From the American standpoint, the key thing was building the South Korean Army. And that took time too. A plan adopted in 1951 would increase that army to almost 15 divisions, then to 20 divisions. Obviously it took time to train and arm this army. The prisoner of war issue was a real one, but it was, I think, defined by the negotiations, not by the general strategic context in which those talks were going on.

Proud of their long history of independence and resistance to invaders, both Koreas asserted that they would seek *Juche*, which can be translated as self-reliance or self-determination. One year after the armistice, with foreign armies still on their soil and scant evidence of recovery, Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung had taken political paths they believed were the preconditions for rebuilding their Koreas for the unfinished conflict. Their survival since 1945 had only reinforced their sense of destiny. Their conviction was that they had a divine mission to rule one Korea and build this new Korea upon the wreckage of their ideological rival. True democracy and self-sufficiency in rebuilding their Korea did not really enter their calculations. The Korean people had only left one war behind and entered another kind of irreconcilable conflict.

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