CONCLUSION

Korea armistice and reflections for the twenty-first century

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> All warfare is based on deception.
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> Sun Tzu

Open hostilities in the Korean War ended on 27 July 1953, more than six and a half decades ago. Yet strangely enough, the armistice that was signed ending open hostilities at that time remains the poignant symbol of an incomplete conclusion—of a war that retains a distinct possibility of resuming at short notice.

This incomplete conclusion has resulted in an armistice that has at times barely even held together across the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) on the 38th parallel. North Korea's artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, the sinking of the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* in the same year and North Korea's sabre-rattling nuclear testing in 2017 and 2018 highlights that despite the 2018 and 2019 presidential summits, there is considerable unfinished business and unresolved historical grievances on the Korean Peninsula.

The names of the leaders have changed and the character of the forces arrayed against each other have evolved over time. But the United Nations Command (UNC), to which Australia actively contributed forces, remains, and the United States Forces in Korea, alongside the Republic of Korea Armed Forces, have continued to practice military drills, just in case. Indeed, Australia has been an active participant in recent years, with Vice Admiral Stuart Maher being appointed Deputy Commander of the

UNC in mid-2019. The Korean Peninsula continues to be the nexus of strategic rivalries in the highly contested region of north-east Asia, which includes Russia, China, the United States, Japan and both Koreas. The unification of the Korean Peninsula remains unlikely while North Korea continues to be supported by China and the South is supported by the United States. Moreover, north-east Asia has historically seen a significant number of Great Power clashes. From the Japanese seaborne invasions of Korea during the sixteenth century, to the Boxer Rebellion, the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and up to the present, north-east Asia has been a highly contested theatre of great powers.

The Australian Government actively supports and advocates for the UN sanctions on North Korea spanning from restrictions on banking and trade, scientific cooperation and travel to a ban on the provision of arms or weaponry. Former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop asserted the government's conviction that UN sanctions would work when she stated in August 2017 that 'UN sanctions will have a significant impact on North Korea's economy and its ability to fund these illegal weapons programs'.[1] In the supercharged environment of deception on the Korean Peninsula, the Kim dynasty and the North Korean elite's primary objective appears to be to ensure the survival of the regime. Understanding how it came to this requires some considerable reflection on the Korean War and its legacy. This book has set out to provide some important context, particularly for Australia, as it seeks to understand the dynamics at work on the Korean Peninsula.

So what did Australia contribute to the Korean War from June 1950 to July 1953? What were the Australians doing there? How significant was their contribution? What difference did it make; what has that meant for Australia since then; and what might that mean for Australia at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century? From a contemporary perspective, it is imperative to interrogate Australia's interests in north-east Asia and ask whether, in light of these interests, Australia would take part in a future conflict on the peninsula. In addition, what role would Australia play in a potential conflict, and does the Australian Defence Force have sufficient capabilities? This historical reflection has sought to go some way to help answer these questions.

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1   A. Remeikis and D. Wroe, 'Julie Bishop places faith and hope in sanctions as North Korean tensions escalate', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 August 2017, www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/julie-bishop-places-faith-and-hope-in-sanctions-as-north-korean-tensions-escalate-20170830-gy6vhp.html.

Australians in postwar Japan

We have seen that as the Korean War broke out on 25 June 1950, the Australian-led British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF), headquartered in Kure, Japan, was preparing to pack up and close down in anticipation of the completion of postwar rehabilitation and the handover from the US-led occupying forces to the people of Japan.

The BCOF presence had shrunk considerably from the 40,000-strong group that had deployed to Japan in early 1946. But the anticipated resistance to the occupation failed to materialise, and BCOF quickly shrank to a considerably smaller force—one predominantly operated by Australians. Australia remained engaged in large part to ensure that its concerns about a possible military resurgence of Japan did not materialise, to influence the postwar treaty arrangements with Japan, to encourage continued US engagement in the region and to bolster ties with its wartime ally, the United States, with whom a treaty alliance had not yet been concluded.

Australia's air force contribution

As Richard Hallion and Jack McCaffrie point out in chapters 6 and 7, respectively, Australia had a squadron of Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) fighter aircraft still based at Iwakuni, ships of the RAN still operating in and around Japan and a battalion of infantry combat soldiers, the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), as well as support elements.

Elements of the RAAF's No. 77 Squadron were quick to deploy, flying ground attack missions and bomber escorts missions from Iwakuni in support of the United States Air Force (USAF). Before long, the squadron relocated to Korea, operating from a succession of airfields providing and conducting a range of missions in support of ground forces. In Chapter 6 Hallion explains how, with the early introduction into the conflict of Soviet-sourced MiG jet aircraft in support of the North Korean forces, the Mustangs proved obsolete.

In time, the Mustangs were replaced by the Meteor—a British-sourced twin-engine jet aircraft, with considerably greater power but less manoeuvrability then the Soviet MiGs or the US F-86 Sabre aircraft

used by the USAF. With Sabres in short supply and Meteors the only viable option, Hallion observes, the RAAF had to adjust the spectrum of missions it could viably undertake. Sabres would become the mainstay of the RAAF's fighter aircraft fleet once they became available after the Korean War.

The experience of working closely with the USAF and other British Commonwealth air force elements played an important role in shaping the post–Second World War RAAF into a professional and advanced air force in the jet age. One clear lesson was for the RAAF to seek to be equipped with the most advanced technology fighter aircraft that money could buy. By and large, that meant equipping the RAAF with US-sourced aircraft or at least aircraft produced by close US allies (such as Britain's Canberra bomber, first ordered in 1950, and the French Mirage fighter jets, ordered in 1960 to replace the Sabres and later F111s and F/A-18s). Indeed, that mindset has persisted in the RAAF, with the RAAF's inventory today being dominated by US-sourced aircraft and related technology.

Australia's naval contribution

For the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), the Korean War marked continuity and change. Drawing on skills and procedures for interoperability refined during the Second World War, the RAN was quick to deploy ships in support of the US-led and UN-mandated fight against the North Koreans. In doing so, the RAN maintained two warships on station throughout the war, starting with HMAS *Shoalhaven*, an Australian-built frigate launched in 1944, tasked with conducting patrols and escorting duties in the Yellow Sea alongside other British Commonwealth forces commanded by a British rear admiral. A month later, HMAS *Bataan*, an Australian-built destroyer commissioned in 1945, was involved in a naval bombardment near the site of the Inchon landings. The RAN participated alongside RN and later USN task groups in a way that consolidated the imperatives for a professional RAN to be maintained for operations alongside allies.

In Chapter 7 McCaffrie explains that change came with the establishment of the RAN Fleet Air Arm in 1948 and following the purchase of HMAS *Melbourne* and HMAS *Sydney*, both of which were light aircraft carriers. HMAS *Sydney* was received by the RAN in 1949 and deployed upon request to Korean waters in 1951, replacing Britain's HMS *Glory*, which had been on operations in Korean waters up to that point. *Sydney* operated

on the more restricted waters off Korea's west coast and maintained a high tempo of operations over the four months of its deployment in late 1951 and early 1952, despite maintenance and deck crews operating at times in severely inclement conditions. It returned to Australia early in 1952, and thereafter Australia maintained two warships on station until well after the armistice was signed. In the end, some 4,500 RAN personnel served on operations in Korean waters, with five killed and six wounded, but the RAN did not again send an aircraft carrier to fight in the Korean War.

The RAN after Korea

The RAN's Fleet Air Arm would continue after the war, but there was fluctuating government enthusiasm for maintaining a strong aircraft carrier-based offensive military capability. Arguably, the air operations conducted over Korea provided an inadequate return on investment. Operational aircraft carriers are costly capabilities to maintain, and governments like to see a clear and prominent return on their investment, particularly in coalition settings. Enthusiasm ebbed as the technology involved became more complex and expensive and the national defence strategy shifted from forward defence to the defence of Australia. With a shift away from supporting fixed-wing operations far from Australian shores, the last of the two aircraft carriers, HMAS *Melbourne*, was decommissioned by 1982, leaving the RAN with no carriers from which to conduct fixed-wing operations. Ironically, it was the Falklands War in 1982 that sealed the fate of the RAN, as the aircraft carrier Australia had planned to acquire from Britain, HMS *Invincible*, was withdrawn from sale due to its proven utility and importance for the success of Britain's campaign to retake the Falkland Islands. Australia overlooked the significance of such capabilities for force projection. Indeed, I would argue, Australia is a middle power that tends to act with small power pretensions and as a result has shied away from seeking to maintain the ability to project force in such an overt way in and beyond its immediate neighbourhood.

In recent years, however, Australian governments have recognised that an island nation requires some self-reliant force projection capabilities. The East Timor crisis in 1999, in addition to other earlier crises in the Pacific, brought this message home particularly clearly. Subsequently, the RAN has commissioned HMAS *Canberra* and HMAS *Adelaide*.

These ships are categorised as Landing Helicopter Dock ships (LHDs) rather than aircraft carriers, even though their flight decks are larger than those found on HMAS *Sydney* or HMAS *Melbourne* and are in fact designed to take fixed-wing aircraft. Still, the prospect of fixed-wing aircraft operating from these new ships remains remote, although unattended fixed-wing platforms (drones) are already in the mix.

The new amphibious configuration, focused on helicopters and the ability to carry and offload stores and equipment across shorelines, supported by drones, reflects a shift in the Australian approach, which emphasises a closer integration of Australian land, air and maritime capabilities as a joint force. It is unlikely but not inconceivable that an Australian naval task group could once more deploy to zones of conflict, as was the case during the Korean War, so the RAN maintains a suite of warfighting capabilities that echo those employed during the Korean War. But it is perhaps with ground forces that the enduring parallels and the significance of the Korean War can be more clearly be seen.

Land forces in Korea

Back in June 1950, 3RAR remained the last Australian land combat force stationed with BCOF in Japan. It was an infantry unit with equipment from the Second World War and with reduced personnel, having its numbers thinned in anticipation of an imminent return to Australia. But under dynamic and forceful leadership, under Lieutenant Colonel Charles Green, 3RAR was quick to deploy and played a prominent part within the 27th British Commonwealth Brigade as part of General MacArthur's UN Command.

The contribution of one infantry battalion was a very much smaller contribution than Australia had mustered at the height of the Second World War, when Australia fielded 14 divisions. In March 1952, Australia's contribution to the Korean War expanded to include two infantry battalions and supporting elements that formed the nucleus of the 28th British Commonwealth Brigade; command of the brigade passed from British to Australian leadership. This composite brigade was part of the 1st Commonwealth Division, which included the Canadian 25th Brigade and the British 29th Brigade. The postwar Australian approach would focus on deploying smaller and more professional forces.

The significance of Australia's contribution, alongside that of Britain, Canada and New Zealand, went beyond the actual units involved. In fact, the influence of these English-speaking countries was disproportionate to their contribution, with the British Commonwealth forces able to bargain collectively with their US counterparts to gain favourable standing for the Commonwealth forces in the war.

Australian troops consolidated their professional reputation for the operations undertaken during the more fluid stages of the war in 1950 and into 1951, playing a leading role in the advance to and subsequent retreat from the Yalu River, and in consolidating the defensive line along what would eventually become the DMZ between North and South Korea. 3RAR played a leading role at the Battle of Kapyong in late April 1951, alongside the Canadian 2PPCLI and other elements of the 27th Brigade, including artillery support from the New Zealand gunners, a US armoured unit, and British command and control support, with British combat troops in reserve. As we have seen, the Battle of Kapyong was the first time the so-called 'five eyes' countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and United Kingdom) had operated together in the one land combat formation. It would not be their last, but it set the tone for more than half a century of close collaboration, cross-examination and sharing of experiences and burdens as part of what has come to be known as the ABCANZ partnership between the armies (and marine forces) of the five countries.

After the Battle of Kapyong, the designations shifted and Australia's two infantry battalions and supporting elements were redesignated to be part of the 28th Brigade. They fought in the Battle of Maryang San, described by the official historian of Australia's involvement, Robert O'Neill, as 'Australia's finest feat of arms in the Korean War'. The chapters that discuss this battle, especially Chapter 10 by Bob Breen and Chapter 12 by William Purves, are some of the most illuminating in the book.

Korean War legacies for Australia

Reflecting on the legacy of the Korean War for Australia, a number of points can be made. First, Australia's prompt contribution of air and land forces as well as naval assets to the US-led counter offensive under General MacArthur proved to be a significant turning point. Until then, the United States had been unwilling to engage with Australia in the formulation

of a mutual security treaty. Thereafter, the United States took a different approach, welcoming the signing of the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS). The Australian External Affairs Minister at the time, Percy Spender, deserves credit for ensuring that Australia's contribution was made early and prominently.

Second, the experience working with the United States under a UN mandate helped to consolidate the place and standing of the United Nations at a time when the world was polarised between the so-called 'First World' aligned with the United States and the 'Second World' of communist countries as the two sought to compete and contest against each other over parts of the so-called 'Third World'. The legacy of the failed interwar League of Nations left many concerned that the United Nations would be stillborn. The Korean War demonstrated that, under the right circumstances, the United Nations could act decisively.

Third, as Peter Edwards points out in Chapter 15, Australia's participation in the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) from 1956 onwards and its contribution of forces to the Vietnam War from 1962 onwards were further manifestations of the mindset that was confirmed by the experience in the Korean War; that is, Australia would seek to bolster security institutions and arrangements that were linked with the United States and that helped encourage the United States to remain engaged in Australia's neighbourhood. This was widely understood by Australian government officials as being the best and most economical way of bolstering the stability and security and, in turn, the prosperity of Australia and its neighbourhood. More recently, the Australian Government has been highly supportive of the expansion and intensification of relations between the Association of South East Asian Nations and the United States during the Obama administration because it was seen as way of further embedding and consolidating US interest and engagement with east and South-East Asia. Historically, Australia has considered it beneficial to its own security when the United States is engaged and interested in the Asia-Pacific region.

Fourth, the Australian armed services, now known as the Australian Defence Force (ADF), have come to place considerable emphasis on the benefits that accrue from close engagement with their US and other close counterparts. Experience working intimately alongside others has helped to hone the ADF and to ensure access to the latest and best military

technology. That has been seen as crucial for a small, boutique ADF, with niche but highly capable forces able to deploy rapidly and confidently, near or far.

That approach of emphasising interoperability has been largely maintained by successive Australian governments in recent years, with Australia seeking to make a substantive military contribution to military campaigns in Afghanistan, then Iraq, then Afghanistan again, and then Iraq again. This has been in part at least intended to burnish Australia's credentials with the United States while also mindful of the need to address transnational security concerns emanating from the Middle East that have had a spill-over effect in Australia and its neighbourhood. This engagement has come at a cost in terms of Australia's ability to engage constructively and consistently with its regional security partners nearby. The situation in the Middle East will undoubtedly continue to fester, but closer to home significant security challenges have arisen in places such as Marawi, in the Philippines, which have reminded the ADF to focus on relationships and capabilities required for security challenges closer to home.

Looking ahead

At the time of publication, there is a strange sense of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (the more things change, the more they stay the same) when it comes to the prospect of war on the Korean Peninsula. While no one expects a possible outbreak of conflict on the Korean Peninsula to resemble the nature of the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, Australians should nonetheless be mindful of the lessons from that experience and of the fact that the future is unknowable. Australia remains under obligations as a party to the UNC and the ceasefire arrangements.

In particular, Australia is one of seven countries (originally 16 in 1953) that is still committed to the UNC Military Armistice Commission, along with Canada, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Under the current Status of Forces Agreement in place with Japan, an RAAF group captain is currently assigned to the United Nations Command-Rear as the commander of the joint Yokota Air Base as part of the UNC logistics arm and Australia's Vice Admiral Stuart Maher is the UNC Deputy Commander. This is a functioning reminder of the Korean War. Australia also still maintains

liaison officers with the UNC in Tokyo, an important and enduring point that 'symbols [are] important in diplomacy'.[2] Australian security scholar and former diplomat Andrew Selth has argued that the limited number of Australian personnel would 'be automatically associated' with any substantial action taken by the UNC.[3] In addition, even though 'Australia's residual connections with the UNC are largely nominal', it is difficult to conceive of a situation in which, if US troops were attacked in South Korea, that Australia, as a formal treaty ally, would not be asked to assist.[4]

President Donald Trump's summits with Kim Jong Un are not entirely unprecedented in terms of the foreign policy of the peninsula since the end of the war in 1953. Indeed, during the leadership of Kim Jong Un's father and grandfather, periods of intense brinksmanship and rivalry often de-escalated slightly at the prospect of more talks or financial/ political incentives being offered by the United States. One example of this de-escalation tendency occurred with South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's adoption of the Sunshine Policy in 1998, which was intended to facilitate engagement with the DPRK through closer economic and social cooperation. North Korea even obtained two light water nuclear reactors from the United States in 1994, under the US–DPRK Agreed Framework, and received multimillion dollar assistance for dismantling a cooling tower at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre. Incentives such as these were not enough to stop the DPRK from continuing to test nuclear weapons and walking out on the Fifth Round of Six Party Talks in 2009.

Australia today has become the United States' closest and most trusted ally in the Indo-Pacific region. The ties are broad, deep and strong. Australian forces are more compatible and interoperable with their US counterparts than ever before. Indeed, Australian forces have conducted military exercises in recent years alongside US and ROK counterparts. These factors combined suggest that should a conflict arise on the Korean Peninsula, the lessons of Australia's experience in Korea from more than 65 years ago might well have a particular and important resonance for its armed forces in a contemporary context.

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2   A. Selth, 'Australia and the Republic of Korea: Still allies or just good friends?', Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, 2018, p. 10, www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/424364/ Selth-Korea-paper-final.pdf.
3   Ibid., p. 10.
4   Ibid., p. 10.