

Communist leader Mao Zedong was in Moscow negotiating a treaty of alliance.⁶ US secretary of state Dean Acheson had recently defined the American defense perimeter in the Pacific as extending from the Aleutians to Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines, thus omitting South Korea and Taiwan. With the guerrilla war stalled in South Korea, Kim was impatient. Although much in debt to the Soviets, he suggested that, if Moscow refused to give the green light, he would turn to Beijing, which was in the process of returning to North Korea tens of thousands of Korean soldiers seasoned by years of combat on the Communist side in the Chinese Civil War.

Kim visited Moscow in late March, staying for nearly a month. Stalin explained to him that, for the reasons above plus the Soviet explosion of an atomic device, the international situation had improved. The time was ripe to initiate a military offensive to unite the peninsula, but with three qualifications: first, Mao must approve the venture; second, it must appear as a counter to a South Korean move north; third, Kim must recognize that, in case of trouble with the Americans, he would depend on China, not the Soviet Union, to send troops to save him.

Kim went to Beijing in mid-May and received Mao's reluctant approval. Although the Chinese leader would have preferred that his plans to attack Taiwan be given priority, he was in a weak position to resist given Stalin's approval of the venture, however conditional, and North Korea's past support for him in his own civil war. The Soviets went on to provide heavy artillery and T-34 tanks and assisted in drawing up an operational plan. At the last minute, Kim claimed that the ROK might have discovered the plan, so he requested permission from Moscow to speed up the main attack, which Stalin gave, thereby reducing the plausibility of the claim that it was a counter to ROK action. When North Korea moved across the thirty-eighth parallel before daylight on June 25, it achieved virtually total surprise.

North Korean forces advanced rapidly, capturing Seoul in three days. On June 29, General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of US forces in the Far East, visited the battlefield south of Seoul. The next day he proposed to Washington dispatch of a US army regimental combat team to Korea. The United States was already providing air support for ROK troops and bombing and strafing north of the thirty-eighth parallel. At American behest, and with the Soviet delegate absent, the UN Security Council had passed two resolutions, the second calling on members "to furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to



21. President Syngman Rhee of South Korea and US general Douglas MacArthur.

restore international peace and security in the area."⁷ President Truman had announced that the US Seventh Fleet would prevent attacks from mainland China on Taiwan and vice versa, plus an increase in US aid to the Philippines and the French in Indochina. Now, he approved MacArthur's recommendation to send American ground forces into combat in Korea. The United States was committed to the defense of the ROK.

Why did the United States fail to take greater action prior to June 25, 1950, to deter a North Korean attack? In the face of such an attack, why did the United States commit its armed forces to repulse it? The answer to the first question rests, on the one hand, in the interaction of public opinion, executive-legislative relations, and maneuvering between the State Department and the Pentagon in Washington and, on the other, in the ambivalent feelings of American officials toward the Rhee regime in Korea. Korea lacked a powerful constituency in the United States and, among the four American occupations,

Handwritten notes in the left margin: "UN Sec Council" with an arrow pointing to the text; "UN Sec Council" and "UN members" written vertically; "274" at the bottom left.

6 See Niu Jun's chapter in this volume.

Handwritten notes in the right margin: "Syngman Rhee", "Dwight D. Eisenhower", "Rhee's regime", "UN Sec Council", "why not", "in the polls", "Rhee's", "mide".

7 United Nations Document S/1508, Rev. 1, June 27, 1950.

was the least desirable place for US soldiers to be stationed. With military spending in decline, the service chiefs sought to reduce the US presence abroad. In September 1947, they determined that the United States had "no strategic interest" in maintaining troops in Korea and pressed for an early withdrawal from the peninsula. The State Department resisted, believing that because of the confrontation there with the Soviet Union, US credibility was at stake. The diplomats finally acceded to Pentagon pressure in mid-1949. The internal situation in South Korea had improved somewhat since the previous fall, and intelligence reports indicated that North Korea would continue its efforts to subvert the ROK from within rather than through overt attack. Short of a dramatic incident, the State Department had too many irons in the fire elsewhere to persist in its resistance to the final troop withdrawal. Reinforcing the predisposition for withdrawal was the lack of enthusiasm in Washington for the volatile, autocratic Rhee, who threatened to mobilize his troops and march north.

The State Department believed that the United States had an important stake in the survival of the ROK, however, and North Korea's attack focused attention on the peninsula as never before. American leaders regarded the attack as Soviet-inspired aggression. Once it became clear that ROK survival was in jeopardy and that no other attacks were in the works along the Soviet periphery, the commitment of US ground forces, readily available in occupied Japan, was virtually automatic. As Secretary of State Acheson put it, decisive action was necessary "as a symbol [of the] strength and determination of [the] west." To do less would encourage "new aggressive action elsewhere" and demoralize "countries adjacent to [the] Soviet orbit."⁸

Intervention of US troops under a UN umbrella prevented a quick North Korean victory and ensured broad international involvement in the struggle to come. Intervention in the Taiwan Strait by the United States, its stepped-up aid to the French in Indochina, and its use of Japan as a launching pad for operations in Korea added a critical regional dimension to the conflict. While the United States and the Soviet Union showed an inclination to avoid a direct military confrontation, heightened tension in East Asia had a clear impact on Europe, where a divided Germany and a divided Berlin within the Soviet zone possessed some similarities to Korea. The potential for escalation of the fighting beyond Korea was obvious to all.

Stages

The Korean War may be divided into four stages. The first constituted the period of North Korean offensive, which lasted from June 25, 1950, until the middle of September of the same year when the military balance on the peninsula changed dramatically. During this time, DPRK forces pushed southward to a perimeter around the southeastern port of Pusan, nearly driving units under General MacArthur's UN Command (UNC), established in early July, out of Korea. Yet, major uprisings within South Korea in support of North Korean troops failed to materialize as anticipated, and extended supply lines made them increasingly vulnerable to UNC firepower. Moreover, by early August, the North Koreans were outnumbered by the combined ground forces of the ROK and the United States.

Meanwhile, beyond Korea, governments made plans and took actions that set the stage for future developments locally, regionally, and globally. In China, Mao commenced a "hate America campaign," focused on US intervention in the Taiwan Strait and ordered a large-scale buildup of his armies in Manchuria in preparation for a possible move into Korea. At the beginning of August, the Soviet Union returned to the UN Security Council to block further US action in that body. In the United States, which had initially defined its objective in Korea as restoration of the thirty-eighth parallel, the Truman administration began considering the possibility of a military campaign to unite the peninsula under the ROK. It also commenced plans for a military buildup at home and in Europe that, pending approval by North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, would include West German rearmament. In Japan, with US forces departing rapidly for service in Korea, MacArthur implemented plans for a 75,000-man National Police Reserve Force, in effect commencing rearmament of the enemy in the Pacific war. In Washington, officials resolved to move forward with negotiations for a peace treaty that would permit American forces to remain on Japanese territory. Finally, in New York, the United States succeeded in getting commitments from twenty-nine UN members for military, economic, or medical assistance for the Korean venture.

The second stage of the war constituted the period of UN counteroffensive, which began on September 15, with MacArthur's flanking operation at Inchon. By the end of the month, North Korean forces were in a disorganized retreat across the thirty-eighth parallel and UN troops had authorization from Washington to destroy them through operations north of the old boundary. The UN General Assembly endorsed a move to unite Korea on October 7. As

8 D. Acheson to Ambassador Alan Kirk in Moscow, June 28, 1950, Record Group 84, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

UN forces advanced rapidly northward, however, Mao, under pressure from the DPRK and the Soviet Union to save the day, fearing the threat posed by US forces poised on China's border, and sensing an opportunity to advance his developing revolution at home, sent nearly 300,000 Chinese troops across the Yalu River into Korea. In late November, as overextended UN troops commenced a reckless advance to clear the peninsula of enemy forces, Chinese armies launched a major counteroffensive of their own, thus bringing the war into its third and most dangerous stage.⁹

During the second stage, potential cracks in the Western alliance appeared, first over the US proposal for West German rearmament and then over the US decision to continue offensive operations in Korea after Chinese troops first made contact with their UN counterparts in late October and early November. Although NATO allies supported US intervention in Korea, they feared it would result in American overcommitment to Asia, a secondary theater in the Cold War, thereby increasing Western Europe's vulnerability to Soviet aggression. The Chinese counteroffensive in Korea magnified this concern, as pressure skyrocketed in the United States to expand the war beyond the peninsula. This pressure became particularly acute after China pushed its forces southward below the thirty-eighth parallel at the beginning of 1951. In the midst of a Soviet scare campaign to prevent West German rearmament, allied governments mobilized politically to restrain the United States.

The focal point for diplomatic action in late 1950 and early 1951 was the UN General Assembly in New York, where US allies joined with neutrals, led by India, to delay American pressure for sanctions against China. That pressure reached a peak in mid-January, by which time Chinese troops in Korea had captured Seoul and had advanced in some sectors as much as fifty miles further south. In early February, the General Assembly finally passed a resolution condemning China as an aggressor in Korea, but delayed sanctions. By this time, UN forces in Korea had regrouped and were engaged in limited offensives northward. With UN evacuation from the peninsula no longer an early prospect, pressure for expanding the war in the United States temporarily subsided.

That pressure escalated again in April, when on the eleventh Truman fired MacArthur from all his commands, and eleven days later, when the Chinese commenced the first of two spring offensives in Korea. After UN forces recaptured Seoul in mid-March and moved to positions for the most part

slightly north of the thirty-eighth parallel, Truman had wanted to explore the possibility of a ceasefire. Yet MacArthur had objected to any end to the fighting short of unification, and he took his case to the public. The president feared that the impetuous general would unnecessarily expand the war by attacking Manchuria, where hundreds of Soviet airplanes positioned themselves for possible intervention in Korea, action that would threaten UNC domination of the air. While Truman's move against MacArthur set off a firestorm at home, the Communists did not challenge UNC control of the air and UN forces successfully repulsed enemy offensives, inflicting huge casualties. By early June, the battlefield had stabilized, the General Assembly had imposed limited economic sanctions on China, and the United States had sent signals to the Soviets and the Chinese of a willingness to negotiate an end to the fighting. The Soviet Union returned the signals later in the month and, on July 10, talks began between the military commands on both sides in Korea at Kaesong along the thirty-eighth parallel.

Thus began the fourth stage of the war, that of stalemate, which lasted until an armistice was finally signed on July 27, 1953. During this time neither side attempted a major alteration of the stalemate on the battlefield. Despite Kim Il Sung's initial desire to fight on in pursuit of unification, Chinese forces had taken enough of a pounding from superior UN firepower and heavy artillery to believe that, unless they could persuade Stalin to provide more air support and more modern equipment, the effort was not simply likely to be in vain but might actually lead to further loss of territory. Since the UNC had resisted the temptation in early June to mount a sustained counteroffensive against badly mauled Chinese units, Mao believed negotiations appropriate. Stalin agreed.

For their part, and against the urging of Syngman Rhee, the Americans had little stomach for another military effort to unify the peninsula. During the third stage of the war, the United States had made considerable progress in building the NATO alliance by creating a command structure in Europe under the leadership of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, by exercising flexibility on the timing of West German rearmament, by sending two more divisions to Europe, by championing the case for the admission of Turkey and Greece to the organization, and by negotiating with allies for the rational distribution of raw materials in the process of rearmament. The United States had also moved forward on a peace treaty and military alliance with Japan. The two parties had concluded preliminary agreements and the United States had gone far in persuading its allies, in the Pacific and Europe alike, to accept relatively generous terms for a settlement that did not include either China or the Soviet

⁹ See also Niu Jun's chapter in this volume.

Union. Just as important, the United States had done much to stimulate economic recovery in Japan through its military operations in Korea. Japanese firms in sectors from textiles to shipping, automobiles, communications, and chemicals received large contracts from the US government, initially for Korea but eventually for military aid programs to other countries in the western Pacific and Southeast Asia. To the Truman administration, a settlement in Korea that was close to the territorial division of Korea prior to June 25, 1950, represented an adequate outcome, as it would greatly reduce US expenditures in an area of peripheral strategic significance and remove a source of tension with allies as well as at home.

Why, with relative balance achieved on the battlefield and with both sides willing to accept an end to the fighting far short of total victory, did it take over two years to conclude an armistice? Part of the answer is that, since neither side was willing to invest the resources or take the risks required to alter the military balance fundamentally, no one had a compelling motive to make the concessions necessary for an early end to the fighting. Each side understood that the struggle in Korea represented but a small portion of the global Cold War; yet they also recognized that the conditions under which the shooting stopped on the peninsula had implications locally, regionally, and worldwide. With neither side having achieved total victory, each sought tactical advantage through the negotiating process.

Reinforcing these circumstances were a series of deep divisions separating the two sides, which magnified the normal feelings of distrust and hostility that exist between contestants in war. First, there was the ideological division between Marxist-Leninists intent on promoting world revolution and liberal capitalists determined to build international stability and order. Then came the material division, that between on the one side the United States, the richest, most powerful nation on earth, and on the other the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, only one of which had industrialized and all three of which could barely imagine achieving the level of material comfort enjoyed by the enemy. Finally, there existed the historical divide between the Chinese and the Korean peoples just emerging from several generations of encroachment by other nations and the Americans, who had been among the encroachers. Among Americans, these last two differences bred a sense of superiority, even occasionally contempt; among the Communists, they produced extreme sensitivity to potential slights and a determination to hide any weakness, often with belligerent behavior. The opportunities for such behavior were increased by the setting of the talks, a neutral area surrounded by heavily armed units of the two sides.

Given the above circumstances, it should come as no surprise that it took four and a half months of acrimonious, intermittent talks to agree on an armistice line, namely the line of battle with a three-kilometer demilitarized zone separating the ground forces on both sides. Initially, the Communists had insisted on the thirty-eighth parallel, but since that line was indefensible and since the UNCG held more territory north of the line than the other side occupied south of it, the United States demurred. In limited offensives during the fall, the UNCG pushed its positions slightly farther north in the central and eastern sectors of the front, which persuaded the Communists to concede the point.

From December 1951 through March 1952, the two sides resolved the issues of postarmistice inspections and reinforcement of forces, leaving the return of prisoners of war (POWs) as the remaining stumbling block. With the UNCG holding more than ten times the number of prisoners as the Communists, the United States insisted on the principle of no-forced-repatriation while the latter held to the traditional principle of an all-for-all exchange. The issue brought to the fore the ideological dimension of the Cold War, with the American position representing freedom of choice for the individual while the Communist stance reflected a statist approach. Since over 20,000 of the UNCG-held prisoners were Chinese, the issue also had implications regarding the continuing conflict in China between the Communists and the Nationalists. In April, the UNCG reported to the Communists that more than 15,000 of the Chinese prisoners intended to resist repatriation. Communist negotiators suspected that they had been coerced and, in any event, it took little imagination to realize that if the UNCG had its way these prisoners would wind up in Taiwan. This result, in turn, would strike a serious blow to the PRC's claim to be the sole legitimate government of China. By this time, Kim Il Sung, having endured for nearly two years the brutal pounding of his territory by UNCG bombers and seeing no chance for early unification, showed a willingness to compromise. With Stalin's encouragement, Mao decided otherwise. Since the agreement on an armistice line, the UNCG had halted offensive operations on the ground. In addition, Mao's forces in Korea had been bolstered by an increased supply of heavy weapons from the Soviet Union and they had dug several layers of tunnels behind the battlefield to better protect themselves against UNCG airpower and artillery. With no indication that the United States intended to escalate in Korea on a major scale, there was much reason to hold firm.

The stalemate showed no sign of ending until late March 1953. On the twenty-eighth, the Communists in Korea agreed to a UNCG proposal for the

exchange of sick and wounded prisoners. Two days later, China wired the president of the UN General Assembly proposing that negotiations in Korea, which had been suspended since the previous October, resume immediately to expedite execution of the exchange and then to resolve the POW issue in its entirety. Stalin had died earlier in the month, and in subsequent meetings in Moscow, his successors and high-level Chinese officials attending the dictator's funeral resolved to revise the Communist position on POWs so as to achieve an armistice. Even so, it took until April 26 to restart the talks in Korea, and it was not until June 4 that the Communists finally accepted the essentials of the US position on POWs.

The death of Stalin probably contributed to resolution of the issue, both because he had been one of the roadblocks to a settlement and because his passing created uncertainties in the Communist world that dictated a period of relative stability on the international front that could not be ensured without an end to the shooting in Korea. January 1953 had brought a changeover in Washington with Eisenhower replacing Truman in the White House, a shift that increased the prospect of military escalation on the peninsula and quite possibly beyond. By early March, the new president had announced that the United States would no longer prevent Nationalist forces in Taiwan from attacking the mainland and several other US officials had suggested that a more belligerent course in East Asia was on the horizon. In mid-May, after the Communists had advanced a new but still unacceptable proposal on POWs, the UNC began air attacks on several irrigation dams in North Korea, which previously had been among only a few targets in the DPRK that were off limits. Two weeks later, the UNC presented its own proposal on POWs, noting that if it was not accepted the talks would be terminated and earlier agreements on neutral areas around the negotiating site would be voided. The pressure also appears to have included a threat to escalate the fighting beyond Korea and to use atomic weapons.

By the middle of June, details on the precise location of the armistice line had been resolved and an end of the fighting appeared to be only days away. On the eighteenth, though, Rhee created one final roadblock by releasing over 25,000 anti-Communist Korean POWs who were under the control of the ROK army. The Communists expressed outrage, but the reality was that they wanted an armistice. As for the ROK president, his dependence on US aid for survival put him in a weak position to defy Washington, which had already considered the possibility of a coup against him. During the weeks that followed, Chinese armies launched tactical offensives against ROK forces, now manning 70 percent of the UNC front lines, pushing them back as much

as six miles in some sectors. Meanwhile, the United States granted several face-saving concessions to Rhee, including the promise of a military security pact and huge amounts of military and economic aid over the next several years in return for assurances that he would not disrupt an armistice. The actions on both sides finally set the stage for the signing of the armistice on July 27.

Impact

After over three years of fighting and two years of on-and-off negotiations, the shooting finally stopped. Much of Korea lay in ruins. Koreans killed, wounded, or missing numbered approximately 3 million, a tenth of the population. Another 5 million became refugees and perhaps double that saw their families permanently divided. Although civil strife and guerrilla warfare never affected the overall balance, they combined with US air action to produce massive civilian casualties. Each side suffered destruction of over a half million homes and the bulk of their industrial plant. Yet the country remained divided and, despite the advance of plans for reunification on both sides, that division was bound to last indefinitely, a fact confirmed by the Geneva Conference on Korea in May 1954.

Nothing could compensate the Korean people for the death and destruction suffered, but by thrusting the peninsula into the limelight as never before in the Cold War, the war had its compensations. It ensured that the United States would never again let its guard down in Korea. In the war's aftermath, Washington quickly concluded a military defense pact with Seoul. It maintained in South Korea tens of thousands of its own troops as well as substantial air power, and it provided massive aid for augmentation of the ROK Army. The ongoing American commitment to the ROK made unlikely the resumption of war by the Communists, and Washington's clear message to Rhee that support would end if he initiated a new conflict served to discourage adventurism by the ROK. A replay of June 25, 1950, by either side was a remote possibility.

Another compensation was greatly expanded economic assistance for reconstruction and development for both Korean governments. The ROK became the largest recipient of American largesse for the remainder of the 1950s and, as Charles K. Armstrong has recently written, the DPRK became "the most ambitious multilateral development project ever undertaken by the socialist countries during the Cold War."¹⁰ The Korean governments, though

¹⁰ Charles K. Armstrong, "Fraternal Socialism: The International Reconstruction of North Korea, 1953-1962," *Cold War History*, 5 (May 2005), 161.

from applying the kind of sustained if limited military pressure on the enemy that might have induced the Communists to accept an armistice at a much earlier date. During the third and fourth stages of the war, India emerged as a clear leader among Third World neutrals, who were increasingly assertive in staking out their own course in the General Assembly. With the United Nations about to explode in numbers as a result of the achievement of nationhood by former colonial territories, majorities for US positions in that body were bound to become more and more difficult to obtain.

Of course, South Korea was an emerging nation as well, but for the moment its survival in the war was as much a liability as an advantage to US diplomacy in the Third World. The war solidified Rhee's position at the head of the ROK and, due to the clear US commitment to the ROK's defense and economic reconstruction, increased his capacity to manipulate Washington. Outside the United States and South Korea, Rhee was a most unpopular figure and American support for him had its price, especially among Third World neutrals such as India and Indonesia. If the war helped solidify US leadership in Western Europe and Japan, it left the contest between Communism and liberal democracy up for grabs among the emerging nations of the underdeveloped world. In fact, by tying the United States more tightly than ever to the colonial powers and by alienating it from and empowering China, the war complicated Washington's task in adjusting to the tide of change in Asia and Africa.

The position of the United States regarding Japan is especially revealing of the difficulty in balancing interests between First World allies and Third World areas. The Korean War had smooched the path toward peace and security treaties between the two powers, ratified in 1952, and provided a great stimulus to the Japanese economy. Yet despite the sharply increased production of material for use in Korea and American aid programs in Southeast Asia, Japan continued to have a sizable balance-of-payments deficit. A possible solution to the problem was to reestablish pre-1945 levels of trade with China, but Washington adamantly opposed this approach for fear that it would lure Tokyo into the Communist sphere. That left as options either increased Japanese exports to North America and Western Europe, which would create domestic controversies in the nations involved, not to mention animosity toward the United States among European allies for promoting the idea, or increased Japanese exports to Southeast Asia, a process well advanced by 1953.¹¹

¹¹ For more on US-Japanese relations, see Seyruri Guthrie-Shimizu's chapter in this volume.

Two problems existed with this latter option, however: first, Southeast Asian markets were of limited size and alone were unlikely to enable Japan to ease its deficit; second, the region was highly unstable, especially given the ongoing French struggle against Communist-dominated nationalist forces in Indochina. Between 1950 and 1953, US support to the French had increased by leaps and bounds, in no small part because of concerns about Southeast Asia's perceived importance regarding Japan's economic well-being and diplomatic orientation and the view that if Indochina fell to the Communists, so would the rest of the region. Yet the French campaign showed no sign of success, largely because France proved unwilling to grant real power to anti-Communist nationalists. The Korean War did not create this problem, but the heightening of polarization between the United States and the Communist world that it ushered in served to compound Washington's difficulties in balancing the needs of leading allies with Third World realities.¹²

In the end, the Korean War was a clear-cut victory for no one, but it helped to stabilize the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States at a level below direct combat. The war sparked major rearmament in the United States, thus narrowing the gap in conventional forces between it and the Soviet Union, and solidified US commitments to and presence in Western Europe and Japan. These developments, in turn, made less likely than before a Soviet-initiated or -backed probe in a key area that would provoke an unanticipated American response and escalate into a global conflagration. Yet the war left a legacy that would exacerbate conflict in other areas. It may have helped avert a global bloodletting like that of 1914-18 or 1937-45, but its cost remained tragically high.

¹² For a more detailed analysis of developments in the Third World, see Mark Philip Bradley's chapter in this volume.