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Fighting While Talking: The Korean War Truce Talks

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In the summer of 1951, after a year of war in which neither side had proved capable of achieving military victory, the U.S.-led United Nations Command (UNC) and the Chinese-North Korean coalition began truce talks in an attempt to end the fighting through negotiations.

The previous spring, UNC forces had turned back a major Chinese and North Korean offensive and began a counterattack that by June had taken them north of the 38th parallel, the pre-war division between the two Koreas. Some American officials argued for continuing the counteroffensive, but the U.S. leadership concluded that any further advances would require the introduction of substantial additional forces (1). South Korean President Syngman Rhee (Yi Sung-man) opposed any settlement that would leave Korea divided and the Communists in control of the North; but, unable to fight on alone, he reluctantly acquiesced to the initiation of truce talks (2). The rising cost of the war, the success of the UNC counteroffensive, and the failure of their own spring offensive led the Chinese and North Korean leadership to seek a negotiated end to the war as well (3).

The truce talks initially took place at the town of Kaesong in western Korea near the 38th parallel. Each negotiating team consisted of five principal military delegates assisted by staff officers. The senior delegate for the Chinese People's Army (CPVA) and Korean People's Army (KPA, the North Korean Army) was Lieutenant General Nam Il, KPA chief of staff. Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy, Commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Far East, served as UNC chief negotiator until May 1952, when he was replaced by Lieutenant General William K. Harrison (4).

The Chinese government established policy for the KPA/CPVA delegation, coordinating the most important decisions with North Korean and Soviet leaders. On the UNC side, the Republic of Korea and the major United Nations allies could occasionally influence policy, but the U.S. government took sole responsibility for the negotiations (5). The Chinese truce objectives consisted of restoration of the status quo ante, a truce line at the 38th parallel, and political settlement of the Korean question at a postwar international conference. The United States sought an armistice confined to military matters in Korea, the cessation of all acts of armed force, and armistice supervision by a commission with powers of observation and inspection (6).

The negotiations were business-like when the two sides agreed, but often dissolved into tension, anger, and harsh language. Ideological differences, cultural misperceptions, and the bitter nature of the war led to mutual suspicion and hostility. Neither side trusted the other's intentions, both believed that any concession would be taken as a sign of weakness, and each was convinced that military pressure was essential to force the other to compromise.

The talks began on 10 July 1951. After working out an agenda, the negotiators turned to substantive discussions on the location and nature of the truce line. The KPA/CPVA side insisted on a truce line along the 38th parallel while the UNC sought a line well north of the current battle line along which the armies of the two sides faced each other. This "line of ground contact" was already north of the 38th parallel along most of its length. By 22 August 1951, the two sides had narrowed their differences and were close to agreement on a compromise truce line based on the ground contact line (7). The

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North Koreans and Chinese then declared a unilateral recess. Although they charged that UNC air attacks had made the conference site unsafe, their actual motivation for the recess seems to have been to gain time while they reassessed their strategy and considered a possible new offensive (8).

The UNC was dissatisfied with the Kaesong site because it was occupied by the KPA/CPVA, who controlled the conference setting. Therefore, during the long recess the UNC sought to relocate the talks to a more neutral location. The KPA/CPVA, after completing their strategy review and deciding against a major offensive, concurred, and on 25 October the talks resumed at Panmunjom, several miles to the east of Kaesong (9).

After a month of tough negotiations, the two sides completed agreement on a Military Demarcation Line and Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the line of contact. They then addressed concrete measures to implement the armistice. They agreed that there should be a Military Armistice Commission with equal representation from both sides, but differed as to the nature and scope of its activities. The UNC wanted a supervisory mechanism with the power of inspection throughout Korea and, fearing a challenge to UNC air superiority, also called for a ban on the repair or construction of airfields. The KPA/CPVA accepted the idea of supervision inside the Demilitarized Zone but rejected the airfield repair ban and inspections outside the DMZ. The issue was finally resolved by a compromise. The UNC dropped the airfield issue and agreed that the Military Armistice Commission would be responsible for supervising the armistice inside the DMZ, while armistice supervision in the rest of Korea would be carried out by a Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission consisting of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland (10). The two sides also agreed to recommend that the "Governments Concerned" convene a post-armistice political conference to discuss withdrawal of foreign forces from Korea, specific recommendations for peaceful settlement of the Korean question, and other issues (11).

The most difficult problem facing the delegates was the repatriation of prisoners of war (POWs). Under the terms of the Geneva Convention and precedents of previous wars, all prisoners held by either side should have been returned home once the fighting ended. The issue was complicated in the Korean War for several reasons. The North Koreans had captured and drafted into their army many South Korean soldiers and civilians. Thousands of these had subsequently been captured by the UNC. If all the KPA prisoners were repatriated, then these South Korean citizens would be sent to North Korea instead of to their homes in the South. In addition, China had just fought a bitter civil war and many of the captured Chinese soldiers would likely prefer to go to Taiwan rather than return to the Communist mainland. By the time negotiations began on the POW issue, U.S. President Harry S. Truman had become convinced that no prisoners should be repatriated against their will. Some argued against this policy, fearing it would delay an armistice and jeopardize UNC prisoners held by the KPA/CPVA. Nonetheless, Truman held firm to his convictions. His concern was humanitarian, but other U.S. officials foresaw a moral and propagandist victory if large numbers of Chinese and North Korean soldiers rejected Communism (12).

The original UNC negotiating team at the Kaesong truce talks site on 16 July 1951. From left to right: USAF Major General Laurence C. Craigie, ROK Major General Paik Sun-yup, U.S. Navy Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy (the Senior UNC Delegate), U.S. Army Major General Henry I. Hodes, and U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Arleigh Burke. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NWCS-111-SC-210-373635.)

Although they initially rejected the concept, the KPA/CPVA might have accepted voluntary repatriation in early 1952 if the majority of the Chinese and North Korean soldiers had elected to return. But after a controversial and sometimes

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Glossary of Acronyms

CPVA = Chinese People's Volunteer Army (Chinese Communists)
DMZ = Demilitarized Zone
DPRK = Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
KPA = Korean People's Army (North Koreans)
POW = Prisoner of War
ROK = Republic of Korea (South Korea)
UNC = United Nations Command

violent process of screening prisoners to determine their repatriation desires, the UNC advised that only 70,000 out of over 170,000 North Korean and Chinese prisoners desired repatriation. The KPA/CPVA negotiators stated flatly that such a low figure could not possibly be the basis for further discussion (13).

The tone at Panmunjom now became increasingly hostile. The Chinese and North Koreans began an intense propaganda offensive, accusing the United States of conducting germ warfare. At the same time, bloody uprisings in the UNC-controlled POW camps embarrassed the UNC and cast doubt on its administration of the camps as well as the legitimacy and impartiality of its repatriation screening. On 8 October, with no progress in sight, the UNC declared a unilateral recess. Neither side was prepared to initiate a major offensive, but both increased their military activity to put pressure on their opponents. In May, the UNC conducted the largest air attacks of the war against the North Korean capital of Pyongyang and destroyed hydroelectric dams on the Yalu River. Both sides carried out ground attacks, while the Chinese stepped up their propaganda campaign and substantially reinforced the CPVA (14).

With the talks deadlocked, other parties now began to search for a formula that would lead to a truce. During the U.N. General Assembly session in autumn 1952, the Indian delegation, strongly supported by the British and other Commonwealth countries, suggested the establishment of a neutral commission to deal with prisoners refusing repatriation. The Indian proposal, which the General Assembly endorsed on 3 December, eventually provided the basis for solving the POW issue (15).

In January 1953 Dwight D. Eisenhower entered office. The new president was aware that neither the American people nor the U.N. allies were likely to accept major new sacrifices. He thus rejected the idea of an offensive to reunify Korea and was willing to accept the armistice as negotiated so far, provided that there was no significant compromise on the voluntary repatriation issue. At the same time, however, he was prepared to consider stepped-up military measures, including the use of nuclear weapons against China, if there was no progress in the truce talks (16). Economically devastated, North Korea was willing to see the war end, and the Chinese leadership—their nation strained by the war effort and eager to begin economic reconstruction—was also prepared to return to the truce talks but preferred that the U.S. make the first move (17).

That move came on 22 February 1953, when the UNC called for an exchange of sick and wounded prisoners. On 5 March, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin died. His successors, facing unrest in the European satellites and seeking a relaxation of Cold War tensions, encouraged the Chinese and North Koreans to negotiate an armistice (18). On 28 March, the KPA/CPVA accepted the UNC proposal for the exchange of sick and wounded prisoners, and soon thereafter their leaders made public statements indicating acceptance of the principle of voluntary repatriation. The truce talks resumed on 26 April, and the two sides quickly agreed on the broad outlines of a plan to deal with the POW issue through a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission composed of the same members as the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, in addition to India (19).

There were still unresolved issues, however. The U.S. leadership, losing patience with the slow pace of negotiations, now attempted to use military action to pressure the Chinese and North Koreans. In May U.S. aircraft attacked irrigation dams near Pyongyang, disrupting rail lines and roads and further straining the North Korean infrastructure (20). Then on 20 May Eisenhower and his advisors decided that if no progress were made, the UNC would initiate a military offensive that might include attacks on China and the use of nuclear weapons (21).

On 25 May the UNC presented its final position. Offering some concessions to make the proposal more palatable to the Chinese and North Koreans, the UNC called for the repatriation of all prisoners within sixty days of the armistice. Those refusing repatriation would be transferred to the Neutral Nations Repartriation Commission for a ninety-day period during which representatives of their home country could try to persuade them to return. Any remaining nonrepatriates would then be dealt with by the postwar political conference, be released, or have their fate decided by the United Nations General Assembly (22).

U.S. officials publicly warned that the UNC would widen its war effort if the Chinese and North Koreans did not accept this final offer. Eisenhower also attempted to transmit veiled nuclear threats through India and other countries. It is unclear what combination of UNC concessions, Soviet pressure, stepped-up air attacks, and nuclear threats persuaded the Chinese and North Koreans to accept the UNC position, but on 4 June General Nam Il declared, "We basically agree to the new proposal which your side put forward on 25 May" (23).

Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) President Syngman Rhee now made a final effort to derail the armistice. He made strong overtures to Eisenhower, ordered public demonstrations, threatened to remove the ROK military forces from the UNC, and pledged to attack any Indian troops who set foot on South Korean soil. On 17 June he unilaterally released Korean prisoners from UNC POW camps. Rhee's actions brought the negotiations to a halt. The Chinese and North Koreans refused to accept an armistice without

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KPA Major General Lee Sang Cho (right) and U.S. Rear Admiral John C. Daniel sign the agreement for the exchange of sick and wounded prisoners of war at Panmunjom, 11 April 1953. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NWCS-111-SC-248-421768.)

assurance that the South Koreans would comply with its terms. Rhee finally agreed to abide by the armistice only after receiving a promise of future U.S. support, a mutual security treaty with the United States, and a major aid package—and after a series of heavy Chinese attacks aimed specifically at South Korean units nearly destroyed two ROK divisions (24). Rhee's acceptance removed the final obstacle to a truce.

General Nam Il and General Harrison signed the armistice agreement at 10:00 a.m. on 27 July 1953, in a hastily constructed pavilion at Panmunjom. Kim Il Sung, Supreme Commander of the KPA; Peng Dehuai, Commander of the CPVA; and Mark W. Clark, Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command, later countersigned the document in separate ceremonies at Kaesong and Munsan. At 10:00 p.m. that same day the armistice went into effect.

The United States and its U.N. allies achieved most of their negotiation objectives during the truce talks and held firm on voluntary prisoner repatriation. Some 50,000 Chinese and North Korean POWs refused repatriation, but any assessment of the value of this moral and propagandist victory must be tempered by the knowledge that the additional fifteen months of fighting cost more than 125,000 UNC and some 250,000 Chinese and North Korean casualties (25). The Chinese and North Koreans had done most of the compromising over the course of the negotiations, but had demonstrated the ability to withstand the United States and to bring it to the negotiating table. Syngman Rhee had gained major concessions from the United States that would assure the survival of South Korea, but he remained unreconciled to the armistice for the duration of his rule.

Neither the war nor the armistice resolved the underlying issues that had led to hostilities in Korea. However, the devastation and high cost of the conflict as well as the strong military posture of both sides have thus far deterred a new war. Meanwhile, the armistice has provided a mechanism to defuse military incidents, thereby reducing the possibility that such clashes might accidentally escalate. Many of the armistice provisions have been ignored or abrogated over the years. In 1994 North Korea withdrew from the Military Armistice Commission, while continuing to maintain a presence at Panmunjom. Nonetheless, nearly a half-century after it was signed, the long armistice still remains in effect. ❑

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U.S. Air Force Colonel Lee Andrew Kinney signs the 22 October 1950 agreement, moving the truce talks site from Kaesong to Panmunjom. (Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, NWCS-111-SC-217-382226.)

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