History in an hour

THE KOREAN WAR

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Introduction

It is one of the most militarized stretches of land in the world. The 38th Parallel: de facto border between the two Koreas, still technically at war some sixty years after the armistice was signed. Tense soldiers peer through binoculars across no man's land, crouched in concrete bunkers shrouded in barbed wire. Artillery batteries are permanently zeroed in, ready to fire. One side has nuclear weapons, and in 2013 declared that it was no longer bound by the 1953 agreement. Korea remains a powder keg.

The war that was fought up the length of this rugged Asian peninsula between June 1950 and July 1953 was very different from what had gone before. Since the Napoleonic period, warfare had been moving towards the extreme of 'total war'. States would mobilize every resource at their disposal in an all-out effort to bring an enemy to his knees. The Second World War represented the epitome of this trend. Yet Korea was a messy, complicated, deeply political conflict. The simple certainties of unconditional surrender which had applied earlier were absent here. This was a more 'limited war' – generals on both sides were constrained not just by resources and the challenges of strategy, but by their political leaders, who walked a tightrope between local objectives and triggering a Third – and 'total' – World War. Perhaps for these reasons, it was a war which, in many parts of the world, quickly receded from the public memory. For the West, there did not seem to be a victory to celebrate. It had been a humiliating, drawn-out and expensive affair. There are very few war films about the Korean War and it is not a period given much attention in school curricula. Even academic coverage has been light compared to the Second World War or Vietnam. In China it is still portrayed as a 'victory' and for the people of Korea its sacrifices remain very real. In the West, however, it quickly became known as 'The Forgotten War'.

Yet this was a pivotal event in world history. For the first time, the United Nations met naked aggression with robust military force. Seventeen member states sent troops to the defence of South Korea. Ultimately, despite the twists and turns of the conflict, the tragedies and the controversies, they won. The fact remains that the United Nations stopped an unprovoked attack on one state by another and ejected the attackers by force of arms.

Millions fought in the Korean War, at least 3 million were killed and most of them were civilians. Russian pilots flew combat missions against US aircraft – the only direct acts of war ever between the two emerging super-powers. Chinese troops intervened on a massive scale. President Dwight D. Eisenhower threatened China with nuclear attack. This was no sideshow. At times, the world was on the brink.

Its repercussions are with us to this day. Not just in the continuing security scares in Korea, but in subsequent events such as the Vietnam War, the evolution of the United Nations, the emergence of post-war Japan and the development of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), to name just a few.

This, in an hour, is the Korean War.

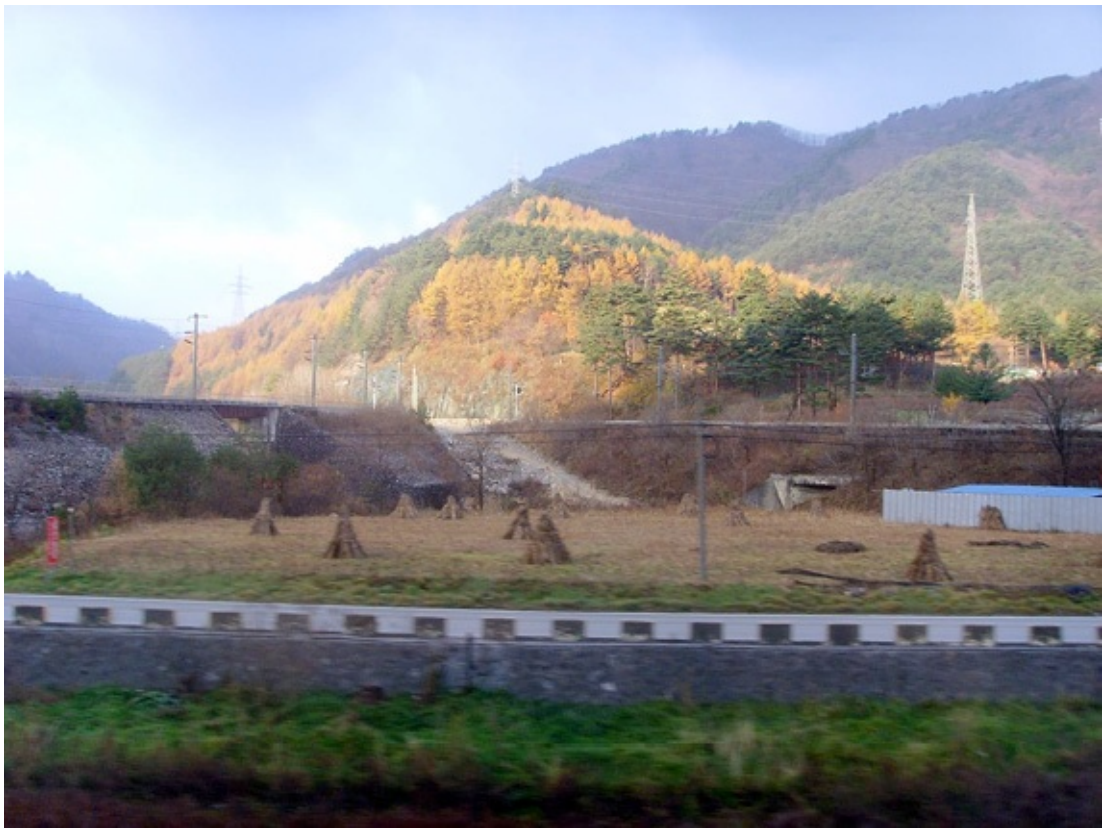
Background

Geography

The Korean peninsula has been described as a ‘natural state’, geographically self-contained and with a culture entirely different to that of its neighbours. It is roughly 400 miles north to south, and 120 miles across at its narrowest. It is mostly rugged terrain, with the Taebaek mountain chain running down its centre making east–west communications difficult. The northern border with Manchuria (part of China) is defined by two rivers, the Yalu to the west and the Tumen to the east. The Primorsky Krai region of eastern Russia shares a thirty-mile border with Korea’s northeast corner as well. The important Russian port of Vladivostok is some 100 miles further to the northeast. Japan lies only 100 miles off the southeast coast. These three powerful neighbours have jockeyed for influence in the region for hundreds of years. To a degree, Korea has been caught in the middle of this rivalry.

The climate may best be described as hostile. The summers are hot and dry, the winters terribly cold. Between the two, spring rains can turn much of the landscape to mud.

In 1950, transport links were primitive, with very few roads or railways and only two major ports. These were at Pusan on the southeast tip and Inchon, serving the capital city of Seoul, midway up the west coast. They would become crucial during the war.

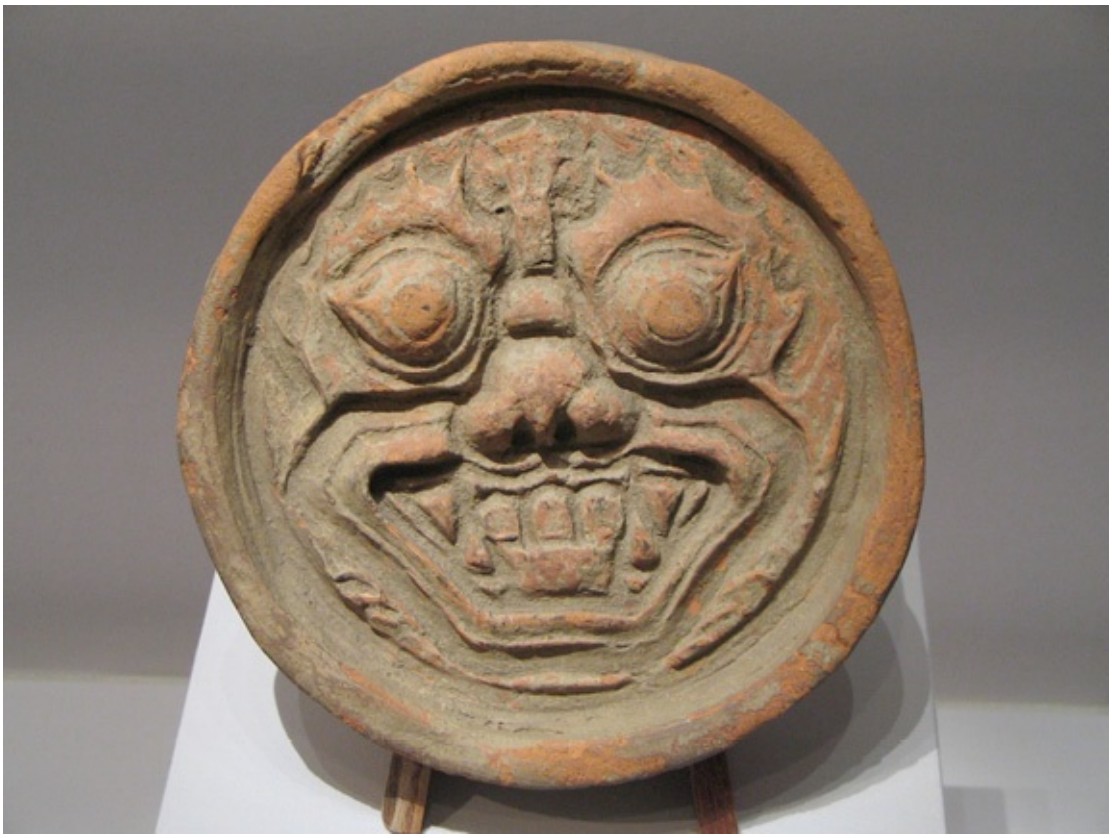


The Taebaek Mountains (Image by G43)

Culture

The Korean language, food and mindset are unlike those of China or Japan. Such distinctions took shape through geographical isolation. From pre-history, the peninsula was relatively self-contained. Linguistically, for instance, Korean is generally accepted to be a unique language, completely unrelated to those of its neighbours. Most scholars regard the overlap with Japanese as a later phenomenon brought about through contact. Although food is based on rice, vegetables and fish, the cooking styles are not those of northern China. The same is true of religion (with a strong Shamanistic tradition), architecture, music and dance.

Once Korea's history became dominated by neighbouring states, however, this cultural purity began to be diluted and cross-pollinated. For example, spoken Korean (and its precursor dialects) was first transposed into the Chinese Hanja script. The culture, therefore, reflects the geography and supports the idea of Korea as a 'natural state'. For these reasons, despite a difficult history and continuing division, this is a region with a strong national identity, maintained in the face of frequent conquest.



Korean end-roof tile from 5th or 6th century (Image by pressapochista)

A History of Conflict

Korea was repeatedly invaded by China from about 200 BC. In 1219 it was the turn of the Mongols, with Genghis Khan leading the first of four large incursions by these fierce nomadic warriors. By the sixteenth century, Japan had emerged as a powerful regional player and it too sought the conquest of the peninsula. The result was devastation, widespread slaughter, economic and agricultural collapse. Little surprise, then, that by the early nineteenth century, Korea had become something of a hermit nation, anxious to minimize contact with outside cultures.

Under the Joseon dynasty this policy worked for a time, with a period of relative tranquillity and prosperity. Chinese suzerainty was formally acknowledged, but without onerous conditions. The growing

imperial ambitions of Japan and Russia, however, combined with their superior technology and large armed forces, would shortly undermine this wish to be left alone.

In 1876 the Joseons signed an overtly exploitative treaty with Japan, granting her significant trading rights. Six years later, in what for a time proved a shrewd piece of diplomacy, Korea signed a treaty with the United States. Brokered by China, this deal helped to offset the influence of the Japanese, who were already basing troops in Korea. Tensions were high, as China and Japan controlled different factions within the weak Korean government. In 1885, both China and Japan agreed to withdraw all of their forces from the peninsula. Yet when in 1894 the Korean emperor requested Chinese assistance in putting down a rebellion, Japan used this as a pretext to send an expeditionary force of her own. This resulted in the First Sino-Japanese War.

Within nine months China had capitulated and Japan's influence in Korea became even stronger. Now though, she found she had another major power competing for influence in the region: Russia. As early as 1896 at the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II, the Japanese had proposed the formal division of Korea, into zones of Russian and Japanese 'influence'. Foreshadowing things to come, a dividing line was suggested along the 38th Parallel. The Russians were interested in the area for strategic reasons. They had no warm water port on the Pacific Ocean. The large Russian naval base at Vladivostok froze during the winter. Port Arthur in Chinese Manchuria was different – it remained open. It was an excellent natural harbour and fortress and, indeed, had been briefly seized by Japan. Direct military threats from Britain and France had eventually forced her to return it to China.

The Korean peninsula lies between Vladivostok and Port Arthur. The Russians leased Port Arthur from China in 1898 and built a railway connecting it to Harbin in China and thence Vladivostok, running along the northern border of Korea. The components were in place for increasing rivalry with Japan.

After years of fruitless negotiation, Japan attacked Russia in 1904 and inflicted a devastating defeat on the Tsar's armies and fleet. She now emerged as the dominant military power in the region. A corollary of that was the eventual full colonization of Korea. It was the USA, also an emerging power during this period, that oversaw the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth which facilitated this. In exchange, President Theodore Roosevelt is alleged to have secured tacit Japanese acceptance of US dominance in the Philippines. Article Two of the treaty explicitly recognized that Japan had 'paramount political, military and economical interests' in Korea. That same year, the Japanese forced Korea to accept a 'Protectorate Treaty', followed in 1911 by the 'Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty'. These were not signed by the Korean emperor, but their dubious legal standing did not prevent Japan from taking complete control.

Japanese rule in Korea was brutal and totalitarian. In essence, the ambition was to eradicate the Korean culture and supplant it with Japan's own, extending to language, the legal system and religion. The animosities which this regime was to engender would last way beyond the Second World War. Between 1941 and 1945, Japan ruthlessly exploited its colony for raw materials as well as men and women, forced to serve as soldiers and prostitutes for the Imperial Japanese Army. As the war drew to a close and Japan's imminent defeat became inevitable, the Allied powers turned to consider the break-up of her empire.

After the Second World War: Two Koreas Emerge

As the Second World War drew to a close, the Allies turned their attention to the future status of those areas which had been under Axis control. Between 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, Korea would be divided into two. By 1950 there was a Russian-dominated Communist North Korea and a US-dominated quasi-democratic South Korea.

It was the Americans who proposed the division of the peninsula into two, along the 38th Parallel. North of this line would become a Russian-controlled zone, with the Americans occupying the south. There is nothing particularly special about the 38th Parallel, other than it being an internationally recognized line on the map. It happens to run across the waist of Korea and the Americans noticed that if it were used in this way, the southern zone would include the capital city of Seoul, and both of the country's major ports.

Such a slicing up of the map by the great powers was commonplace at the time. Little real account was taken of the interests or aspirations of the local inhabitants. From an American perspective this was a bold proposal, in that the Russians were likely to emerge as the more powerful player in the region. Russia had undertaken to attack Japan within three months of the defeat of Nazi Germany. The obvious means of doing this would be to invade Japanese-occupied Manchuria, including Port Arthur and the Chinese border with Korea. They could then move south into Korea. This is what transpired. Other allied forces in Asia (chiefly American and British) were thinly spread. It would be months before any kind of garrison could be sent to the south of Korea.

Despite the obvious weakness of the American position, the Russians accepted the 38th Parallel proposal at the Potsdam conference. Their chief focus was on Europe and they may have imagined that in due course, the whole of Korea would fall to them.

Therefore, as two Koreas began to emerge from the dust of the Second World War, they did so against the backdrop of the nascent Cold War. With considerable justification, Churchill described an 'Iron Curtain' falling across Europe. In Eastern Europe, democratic sensibilities were ignored and brutal Communist regimes imposed at the behest of Moscow. In 1948 the Russians had come close to provoking a Third World War by blockading West Berlin. The Chinese Civil War had reached its climax in 1949, with the establishment of Mao Zedong's government in Beijing and the rump of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists confined to the island of Taiwan (Formosa).

In American public life and within President Harry S. Truman's Administration, there was a tendency to view such developments as a monolithic and malevolent conspiracy, driven by Moscow. There was a widely held view, for example, that the West had 'lost China' through a lack of political and military resolve. This may seem an over-simplification to the modern reader. Yet given the appeasement which had allowed fascism to gain such a grip on Europe, it was understandable. Communism did seem to be on the march, and it was trampling human rights and democracy underfoot. Sentiments in Western Europe, even among governments with socialist agendas, were not so different from the US point of view.

For all of these tensions, the Russians stuck to their side of the deal when occupying northern Korea in 1945. Although weeks ahead of the Americans, their forces remained north of the 38th. There was a notional commitment from both parties to seek a solution for the entire peninsula, thereby creating a united Korea. However, in both the Russian and American zones, it was not long before each party was pursuing policies designed to preclude the opposing ideology from taking hold.

In the North between 1945 and 1950, the Russians built a totalitarian Communist regime under Kim Il Sung, formally declaring the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. The measures introduced included land reform and a semblance of worker control; corruption was largely eliminated. These were popular policies. It would, therefore, be wrong to suggest that the new regime was devoid of support. Kim had fought the Japanese in Manchuria during the 1930s and then spent five years studying in the Soviet Union, before returning to his country of origin in 1945. Although he was never simply a Soviet puppet, by 1945 Kim was much closer to Stalin's regime than he was Mao's. Kim was still only 38 when the Korean War broke out.

In the South, US General John Hodge headed a somewhat inept military administration which relied on former Japanese collaborators – notably their brutal police force – and repressed any left-leaning political activists. At the same time, Syngman Rhee became the Americans' favoured contender for political leadership. Rhee had spent much of his life in exile in the United States. He was a highly educated Christian, with decades of experience in Korea's volatile political history. This included imprisonment by the Japanese and advising at the Treaty of Portsmouth negotiations in 1905. By 1945 he was already 70 years old. Virulently anti-Communist, Rhee was elected the first President of South Korea in July 1948.

While Rhee and Kim manoeuvred themselves into power between 1945 and 1948, there were parallel efforts by the USA, Russia and the United Nations to reach some kind of agreement which would unify the country. The Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in December 1945 had agreed to establish a joint US-USSR Commission for the government of Korea. Largely ineffectual, the Commission at least served to prevent open conflict between the Americans and Russians in Korea. In the South, Rhee's 'Democratic Council' opposed the Commission's timetable for independence and provoked riots and strikes. Eventually the Americans took the Korean problem back to the UN General Assembly, which called for elections across Korea. The Russians rejected this proposal and the two elections which brought Rhee to power in the summer of 1948 were confined to the US zone. In May, Rhee's party secured control of the National Assembly. In July, he won a personal mandate when elected directly to the South Korean presidency. These were followed by one party 'elections' in the North later that year.

By 1949, both the USA and Russia had withdrawn their military forces from the peninsula. Korea was split into two hostile mini-states, each beholden to its super-power. The rhetoric between them was heated, with claim and counterclaim. Rhee and Kim were Nationalists – both sought dominance over the whole of Korea. Neither recognized the legitimacy of the other. Border incidents and guerilla attacks in the South became commonplace. The scene was set for war.

The North Invades

June 1950: The Surprise Attack

The Korean War began just before dawn, on Sunday, 25 June 1950. Taken completely by surprise, and outclassed in every respect, South Korean forces were pushed rapidly back. Within days, however, the United Nations had intervened on behalf of the South. The first UN ground troops, an American unit, would meet the North Koreans on 5 July.

The war began early that Sunday when, four or five miles north of the 38th Parallel, Russian-built Katyusha rocket batteries lit up the sky with a blistering barrage. T34 tanks rolled forwards, accompanied by swarms of North Korean infantry.

It was immediately clear that this was a well-planned, full-scale invasion. The South Koreans had no tanks or heavy artillery, and but a handful of obsolescent aircraft. Their infantry formations were under strength, with divisional organization only notional. Arrayed against them were ten fully equipped North Korean divisions trained in the Soviet tactical doctrine. Thousands of the North Korean troops were combat veterans, recently returned from fighting under Mao's command during the Chinese Civil War.

They were supported by independent tank battalions and a small but capable tactical air force. In these early clashes, there really was no contest. In most cases the South Korean units disintegrated, clogging roads that were already swarming with refugees. A series of North Korean columns raced towards Seoul, down the centre of the country and along the eastern coast as well.

To General Douglas MacArthur, woken with the news only hours after the first North Korean assault, this seemed an obvious Russian move designed to test Western resolve. MacArthur headed the American Far Eastern Command, with his headquarters in Tokyo. Until now, his preoccupation since the end of the Second World War had been the rebuilding of Japan, of which he was in effect emperor. The North Korean attack would quickly change those priorities. When President Truman was told the news on what was still Saturday evening back in the USA, his instincts told him the same thing: this was a Russian gambit.

From the opening hours of the Korean War, therefore, the American attitude was to look for a conspiracy emanating from Moscow. This strategic stance would colour much of the policy towards the Korean situation over the next three years. Millions of words have since been written on the role played by Russia and, indeed, China in the North Korean attack. Given the secrecy of those regimes, and notwithstanding the volume of information made available since the collapse of the Soviet Union, historians remain divided as to the extent of Russian or Chinese culpability.

Some things are indisputable. The North Korean Army had been supplied with large amounts of Soviet military hardware, making it a much stronger force than its southern counterpart. Crucially, the armour meant that this was an army capable of offensive operations – unlike Rhee's. Soviet instructors had been seconded to North Korean units since 1948. Kim was close to the Russians, having spent several years there. He had visited Moscow and Beijing earlier in 1950. It is stretching credulity to imagine that the possibility of invasion was not mentioned. Chinese railways would be needed to maintain the North Korean logistical effort, and, in particular, any resupply from Russia. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine that either China or Russia was entirely in the dark prior to the North Korean assault.

That is some way from asserting, however, that the attack was ordered by Moscow, Beijing, or both. Perhaps the most that can be said is that while it is possible that Kim initiated the attack under direct instructions from Moscow, it is more likely that Stalin's headquarters at the Kremlin was simply content that it should go ahead.

Russia and/or China may have been willing to take a gamble with Korea at this level – to offer support without full-scale involvement. The Truman Administration was after all emitting confusing political signals during these critical months of the Cold War. Although secretly resolved to confront Communist aggression robustly, a speech by Secretary of State Dean Acheson in January 1950 seemed to concede that Korea was not a vital American interest.

Yet China was in no position to entertain war with the United States. Mao had only recently secured power in Beijing and was much more interested in finishing the war against Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan than he was in new adventures to the north. Chiang's KMT (Kuomintang) Nationalist forces were now confined to this large island and Mao hoped to invade it. This would eliminate final opposition to Communist rule in China, putting a definitive end to the Civil War there.

Although Moscow had exploded an atomic device in 1949, it was in no position to risk a nuclear confrontation which, in 1950, it would have lost. But if the United States was ambivalent about Rhee's regime in South Korea, then why not let their ally Kim Il Sung see what he could achieve?

This kind of speculation must have been academic to the South Korean troops thrown into the line across the 38th Parallel in June 1950. Such was their routing, that of the 100,000 men notionally under arms on 25 June, about 80 per cent were unaccounted for after the first week. Rhee himself fled the capital with his key ministers on the 27th. By the 29th, the city had fallen. The bridge across the Han river was choked with refugees as families fled Kim's troops. South Korean Army vehicles barged through in their panic. The elderly or infirm were run over, some falling into the water. Children lost their parents – sometimes for ever.

South Korean refugees flee the invasion in 1950 (Image by US Defense Department)

The North Korean drive was organized into four fighting columns. Two of them converged on Seoul, one cleared the Ongjin peninsula to the extreme west, and one pushed down the east coast, supported by a small-scale amphibious assault. After the fall of the capital, these were consolidated into two – an eastern and a western thrust.

About thirty miles south of Seoul lies the small town of Osan, spanning the main route south. On the morning of 5 July 1950, elements of the North Korean 4th division advanced towards the town from the north. As they did so they came under fire from infantry and artillery. After a sharp firefight, during which the defenders attempted to knock out several tanks using antiquated bazookas, the attacking North Koreans enveloped the position and the defence collapsed. The poorly disciplined troops scattered, many of them falling prisoner to the advancing Communists, others making their way south in dribs and drabs. Before too long, it dawned on the North Korean commanders that the battalion they had steamrollered consisted of American troops.

They were members of 'Task Force Smith': infantry of the US Army. Smith's five hundred or so troops had not acquitted themselves particularly well. This is perhaps understandable when one considers that they were under-equipped and poorly trained. The first foreign troops to arrive in the Korean theatre, they had been in the country for only four days, hurriedly moved north and put into the first blocking position available. MacArthur's Far Eastern Command, of which they formed a part, was in poor shape. Starved of men and equipment, they were accustomed to the soft life of garrison duty in Japan. In contrast, Task Force Smith had been outnumbered and outfought by a competent opponent with excellent equipment, training and motivation. If this was to be representative of the American response, then the North Koreans had little to worry about.

Fortunately for South Korea, Task Force Smith represented a lot more than MacArthur's run-down garrison troops. Already, US Air Force planes were beginning to make their presence felt in the skies above the battlefield. The 7th Fleet had orders to cordon off Taiwan, as well as support operations in Korea. In less than two weeks, the Korean War had spiralled beyond Kim Il Sung's hopes of a swift and decisive local war.

For the poorly equipped Task Force Smith also represented the initial ground contingent of the UN forces. The Americans were responding to a call to arms from the UN Security Council and had made their troops available on that basis. In the absence of an appointed overall UN commander, MacArthur took on leadership responsibility.

A United Nations War

At the international level, events moved very quickly following the North Korean attack of 25 June. That same day, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 82, condemning the North Korean onslaught. By the 27th, Resolution 83 had been passed, calling on all member states to provide military assistance to resist the invasion. Truman immediately ordered American air and naval assets into the theatre and that ground troops should be despatched as quickly as possible. Task Force Smith would be the first of these. Meanwhile, American diplomats set about assembling a coalition of nations willing to support this first real test of UN collective security.

The United Nations, a new organization, was keen to demonstrate the strength of its solidarity. It had been established in 1945 at the instigation of the Allied victors of the Second World War. Importantly, its architects were anxious to avoid the perceived weaknesses of the League of Nations, its forerunner. With far fewer members than today (and most broadly supportive of what might be termed an 'American-led agenda') there was the strong sense that the United Nations must not be allowed to fail. The catastrophe of

the Second World War was fresh in people's minds. It was felt that had Hitler been challenged earlier, rather than appeased by the League, then much of the suffering could have been avoided. Attitudes to collective security in the face of breaches of international order were a lot more robust than tends to be the case today.

The senior body responsible for global security at the United Nations was the Security Council. Permanent membership included what at the time were still known as the five 'great powers' (Britain, France, the USA, Russia and China), each of whom had a veto. The chairmanship rotated, as did the membership of other states. There were ten of these, elected on a regional basis and without veto rights. The Security Council, therefore, had a total of fifteen members, five of them permanent. UN Security Council resolutions were supposed to be mandatory, unlike those of the larger General Assembly, which included all UN member states. In practice, the veto system meant that it was very difficult for the Security Council to take controversial decisions – or, indeed, to reverse them.

In terms of technical process, Russia had boycotted the Security Council. She was not represented at these crucial meetings and, therefore, had no opportunity to veto the proposed resolutions. The reason for the boycott was a dispute about the Security Council's refusal to officially recognize Mao's Communist regime in China. Nationalist China, now no more than a mini-state located on the island of Taiwan, continued to hold China's seat. With some justification, the Russians maintained that the seat should be given to Mao's Communist regime, as the real government – benign or not – of almost all of modern China. In terms of realpolitik it is hard to exaggerate the blunder that this stance represented for Russia. Had they been present, presumably they would have vetoed the motions and the Korean War might have taken a very different course.

There are those who argue that this is evidence of Russia's innocence in the matter of the Korean War. The same argument has it that she made a fuss about China in order to strengthen Mao's dependence on Moscow. Whatever the case may be, Russia was back on the Security Council by August – this time in the chair. For the remainder of the conflict the Council became deadlocked (in the manner that has become increasingly familiar since). This would also mean that Russia could not reverse what was now established Security Council policy: this was to be a UN war.

The UN Coalition Builds

As MacArthur's American forces struggled to contain the Communist offensive in South Korea, the remaining members of the United Nations considered their positions in response to Resolution 83. During those fateful days of late June and early July, a US diplomatic effort through the United Nations would build a broad coalition, which would finally see military support from sixteen other nations.

Britain immediately sent her Far Eastern Fleet, including two aircraft carriers, to operate in support of the US Navy. Two infantry brigades were eventually to follow. France, already heavily committed in North Africa and Indo-China, sent an infantry battalion. There were also contingents from Turkey, Belgium, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and others. In total, seventeen nations were to contribute combat units of one form or another.

By far the biggest contingent, from the war's very outset, was from the USA. This was perhaps inevitable, given the global situation in 1950. Although the USA had emerged from the Second World War with a booming economy, many nations had not. The 'old' great powers, whatever their aspirations, were not the players they had been only five years earlier. Britain, for example, struggled to find sufficient troops to equip her expeditionary force. At least she was to pay for her own soldiers. In the case of many

of the smaller countries, it was so important for the USA – and indeed for the infant United Nations – to demonstrate broad support for the war, that the USA paid a daily rate for each soldier sent.

Some countries, uneasy about the despatch of actual fighting troops, instead sent medical or other support. A famous example was the Indian parachute field hospital, which actually took part in an American combat jump in March 1951. All support was gratefully received, if only for the message it conveyed about collective security. Those nations which made such a commitment are recorded in Appendix 3. Less welcome were the many promises of support which came to nothing.

There was one important offer of immediate military assistance which Truman rejected. Chiang Kai-shek had suggested the despatch of 30,000 Nationalist Chinese troops from Taiwan. For MacArthur, this was potentially a game-changing proposal, which could have a huge impact on the desperate fighting now underway. Chiang's troops would have quadrupled existing UN ground forces at a stroke. For the President though, this was a double-edged sword. To allow the participation of Nationalist China would be to broaden the conflict and invite Communist Chinese or even Russian intervention. At this time, although Russian equipped, the attackers consisted entirely of North Korean troops. Truman wanted to keep it that way; he did not want a world war. It was an early example of the restraint which was to characterize both sides' conduct of the war.

Within a week then, the Korean War had become a United Nations war. This was testimony to the diplomatic skills of the Truman Administration, the stance taken by Russia at the United Nations, and the often underrated internationalism of those states which chose to spend their blood in defence of another. It was equally clear, though, that the UN project in Korea would be led by the USA. It was the Americans who had led the debates at the Security Council and built the coalition. Of necessity, theirs had been the first foreign troops in theatre; and theirs would be the major contribution throughout the conflict. All of these factors, coupled with the overriding sense of emergency in July 1950 and the sheer practicalities involved, pointed to an American overall commander. The UN Secretary General's proposal of a committee to run the war was swept aside. MacArthur was appointed to command all UN forces by Truman on 7 July and the seeds of some of the United Nations's most contentious problems thereby sown.

In theory, MacArthur had four infantry divisions available to him in Japan. These were understrength units, though, and their tactical competence was highly questionable. Furthermore, he had no means of shipping them en masse to the front, as it would take time to assemble the naval transport required. There was also the delicate question of identifying who would take over the occupation role they had undertaken in Japan. In this there was little real choice – and the use of Japanese police and security agencies hastened her return to full normality as a sovereign state.

As for the infantry, troops were shipped to Korea as the transport became available, during July and August. Most arrived in battalion strength and were committed wherever the latest crisis might be. General Walton Walker commanded in Korea itself, establishing the American 8th Army – in reality a weak army corps. MacArthur, save for a publicity-based visit lasting less than a day, preferred to exercise command from Tokyo.

At the same time, the US Congress approved a special war budget of $11b and American Army and Marine divisions began assembling across the USA. For the Marines, in particular, Korea was to become a make-or-break campaign. During the period of disarmament which had preceded the war, their numbers had been cut drastically. The idea that the Marine Corps' role should be confined to small shipboard defence parties had gained currency. Korea might rekindle the concept of the large amphibious operations and expeditionary warfare which the Marines had perfected during the Second World War.

The Korean War was to spur overall rearmament in the USA, as well as in countries such as Britain. There was a sense that the Russians had been found out – proved guilty – and that the West now needed to

be on its guard. Above all, the fear was of a sudden Soviet attack in Europe. This notion, that Western Europe lay vulnerable to Russia's tank armies massed on the Elbe, was a key factor in Truman's thinking and an obvious major concern for Britain and France. All of the debate on the UN side about escalation in Korea was coloured by this lurking dread.

The United Nations Clings On

Air and Naval Power

Strategically, the most important assets for the United Nations during those early weeks were air and naval power. Almost all UN air power was provided by the US Air Force, while naval forces included a sizeable British component. It was in these areas that even in July, the Americans and their allies began to exert considerable military influence. By the end of the month the North Korean Air Force had become an irrelevance, as its piston-engined aircraft were blasted on the ground and in the air by American jets. Kim's air force had experienced no difficulty against the tiny numbers initially fielded by South Korea and, until the arrival of the Americans, provided useful ground support for their advancing columns. But the US Air Force brushed them aside in days.

UN air power: a North Korean supply train is attacked (Image by US Army)

For the following months the United Nations enjoyed the huge advantage of completely uncontested control of the air. It took a while to develop effective liaison with the ground troops, but it was not long before Walker's units had a functioning tactical air force at their disposal. The interdiction of the North's supply system was also commenced in earnest.

At sea meanwhile, the US 7th Fleet and the Royal Navy deployed their own aircraft on strikes against the North, while providing naval gunfire support for the troops and continuing with the effort to shift reinforcements to the peninsula. In the waters between Taiwan and China, Truman's decision to 'neutralize' the area had effectively precluded a Communist invasion and put a stop to Nationalist raids on the mainland. At a stroke, the Chinese Civil War had been ended. By this time, the American Administration had accepted that it had 'lost' China, although it was committed to the defence of the remnants of the Nationalist cause represented by Chiang's regime in Taiwan. More surprising was the extent to which the blockade of the straits was a bluff: the 7th Fleet really had its hands full in Korea, and the evidence suggests that any early US patrols of the straits were on a very small scale.

July–August 1950: The Situation on the Ground

During those summer months of 1950, Walker's situation on the ground became a desperate one. By August the United Nations had been pushed back to an enclave around Pusan, in the far south.

Walker's leading division went down to one defeat after another. Small individual units would find themselves outnumbered and enveloped, facing enemy tanks for which they had no effective counter. Worryingly for American arms, their infantry would retreat (or 'bug out', as it was commonly known at the time) rather than offer more than token resistance. There was little defensive imagination, no attempt to prepare anti-tank obstacles or ambushes. In this manner, one position after another would collapse. The retreating South Korean army fared no better, lacking cohesion and even the limited number of heavy weapons that the Americans possessed. Deep defence cuts in the USA, and the necessity of deploying lightly armed garrison troops directly from Japan, meant that Walker's forces were completely outclassed during this period.

By mid-July more American units were beginning to arrive in the line. But the pattern repeated itself. The crisis arose at the end of the month, when a North Korean force struck round the UN left flank and headed southwest towards the coastal town of Masan. Potentially, this move was fatal. From Masan, it would be easy to move against the allied rear and seize the vital logistics centre and port at Pusan. With no major port at his disposal, Walker would have been forced to withdraw. A political and military catastrophe for the United Nations loomed.

The Defence of Pusan

For five weeks, the United Nations and the remnants of the South Korean Army fought a series of difficult defensive battles around Pusan. Finally, however, the Communists ran out of men and supplies.

With the threat to Masan, Walker had no choice. He pulled all his units back behind the line of the Naktong river, holding Masan to his left and arcing round in front of Pusan to rejoin the coast again to the northeast. The line was 130 miles long and Walker had about 100,000 demoralized troops with which to defend it. Geographically, although the river was shallow and fordable in many places, it was commanded by a range of low hills which gave good defensive positions. This was where the United Nations would have to make its stand. There was simply no more room – behind them was Pusan and the sea.

US tank crew on the Pusan line in August 1950 (Image by US Army: Sgt Riley)

The United Nations dug in and the whole position began to take on the feel of a siege. The end of the daily retreat meant that allied troops had the time to notice the plight of the local people. Thousands of them hung around the UN positions, scraping a living. They would beg, run errands, mend clothes. Mostly they lived in the open, or in makeshift shacks and shelters. These were people who had lost their homes, their families, or both. Mini-cities of camp followers such as this would accumulate near UN positions for the rest of the war, wherever the frontlines had stabilized for more than a few days. By 1953, itinerant Koreans would be running a huge semi-formal support industry for the United Nations, everything from laundry and cleaning to prostitution.

Unbeknown to Walker, at Pusan matters were not quite as easy for the Communists as he might have imagined. Their tactics had been profligate, throwing infantry and tanks at the UN forces with little finesse. UN firepower, and particularly their aircraft, had taken a heavy toll on them. There were few reserves either of men or material. Already, the problem of resupplying the North Koreans at the southern tip of the peninsula was evident, greatly exacerbated by the UN air effort. At this stage of the war the North Koreans were probably down to about 70,000 combat troops. Although attacking, they were outnumbered. Their infantry were demonstrably better than those at Walker's disposal and they had a string of successes to their credit. Time and mathematics did not look good for the Communists, however. While their offensive power would diminish with every assault they made, the United Nations was now reinforcing Pusan as fast as it could. Modern US armour, plentiful artillery and more infantry formations streamed into the besieged port. Yet if they could only seize Pusan, the Communists could knock Walker's army back into the sea.

The five weeks that followed saw a series of desperate battles along the hills that formed Walker's line. In the initial phase, the North Koreans would mount local attacks, often putting the defenders to rout and achieving short-term success. Then would come the counter-punch, as Walker threw in some of the few high quality units that he had in his command. Supported by swathes of tactical airpower, the United Nations was generally able to restore the situation just in time to meet the next challenge.

By 20 August the Communists, all too aware of the time and numbers dynamics, switched tactics. For a week, there was a lull in activity along the line. North Korean divisions were being prepared for one last major assault; but this time, it would involve all ten divisions and it would be fully co-ordinated.

On 31 August 1950, the North Koreans launched simultaneous attacks against four separate sectors of Walker's Pusan perimeter. It was the last throw of the die for the besiegers. During five desperate days, both American and South Korean formations crumbled, withdrew and counter-attacked. Walker's fire brigade reserves couldn't be everywhere. Active consideration was given at the highest level to a full UN withdrawal from the Korean peninsula. Just when such a nightmare proposition began to seem a real likelihood, the pressure eased. Unit by unit along the allied line reported that they were holding ground and that the Communists had stopped attacking. The plain fact was that the North Koreans had run out of men, ammunition and supplies. The crisis at Pusan was over.

Walker, the stubborn and straightforward commander of the 8th Army, became the hero of the day. Almost by willpower alone, he had turned a low-quality American corps and a beaten South Korean Army into a force which managed to cling on at Pusan. 'There will be no more retreating,' he had said at the beginning of August; and he meant it.

UN Counter-Offensive

September 1950: Invasion at Inchon

The month of September 1950 was to see a turnaround in UN fortunes. To the northwest, MacArthur would lead an invasion which would recapture the port of Inchon and the capital, Seoul. While from the south, Walker would break out of Pusan and advance to join him.

As Walker fought his battle at Pusan, MacArthur and the US Joint Chiefs of Staff had long been debating the next phase of the war. There was an argument for bolstering the 8th Army through Pusan, fighting a breakthrough battle and hopefully pushing the North Koreans back up the peninsula. Additional resources for achieving this were limited to two new American divisions. The problems with this conventional approach were that it entailed a difficult frontal assault and that Walker's forces were exhausted. MacArthur favoured something much bolder.

During the second half of the Second World War, MacArthur had led an impressive offensive across the southern Pacific, from New Guinea northwest as far as the Philippines. Using nimble island-hopping tactics, with a relatively small army and supporting naval force, MacArthur had repeatedly pushed the Japanese off balance. He understood the value of strategic outflanking achieved by amphibious assault. Now he was convinced that the same technique would work in Korea.

MacArthur's thinking was based on the assumption that logistics were the greatest weakness of the North Koreans. A successful invasion hundreds of miles behind the Pusan front could choke off their supply line. This would make the maintenance of Pusan's besiegers untenable. In this he had many supporters among the Joint Chiefs, but there was considerable alarm at MacArthur's advocacy of an attack on Inchon itself. Inchon was a major port and it gave access to Seoul, only twenty miles up the road. But it would be a tough nut to crack. He had first floated the idea at a meeting in July, and subsequent to that a crucial session was held in Tokyo on 23 August.

At the time, all eyes were on Pusan. The UN command was aware that the North Koreans were resupplying for a massive assault on Walker's defences. Nine speakers in the Tokyo meeting rose in succession to explain why an invasion at Inchon was a bad idea. They had plenty of evidence to offer. The port had some of the highest tide differentials in the world. This meant that there would only be three dates on which an assault might be feasible during September or October. Even then, the landing craft would have only three hours on the narrow beach. To make matters worse, these time slots were all at night. Before that, the fleet would have to negotiate a narrow channel – defended by enemy guns and probably mined – that led to the port.

MacArthur was adamant. The very fact of Inchon's seeming invulnerability made it an ideal target. Certainly if the troops did manage to get ashore, Inchon offered plenty of strategic opportunity. It had (by Korean standards) good port facilities and was only twenty miles from Seoul. MacArthur's emotional forty-five minute appeal swayed the meeting. By the 28th, he had formal Joint Chiefs of Staff approval.

The command arrangements for the Inchon landings were to be the cause of further controversy. A new X Corps was created, including the two reinforcing divisions, under Major General Edward Almond. Convention would suggest placing Almond in turn under the command of Walker's 8th Army, but instead MacArthur had Almond and his corps reporting directly to him, as overall UN Commander. Having not

set foot on Korean soil since the outbreak of the war, he now decided to accompany the fleet. Matters between Almond, MacArthur and Walker were made worse by Almond's arrogant manner and the fact that he was considered one of MacArthur's cronies.

Notwithstanding such tensions, the fleet sailed from Japan on 5 September. It took ten days to reach Inchon, running through one of the fiercest typhoons of the season. The landings could not have gone more favourably for the United Nations, however. Appalling security discipline had meant that US troops in the bars of Tokyo had been openly discussing Inchon. Yet the North Koreans had not discerned this – or at least, had not seriously reinforced the area. On the night of the landing the naval bombardment was followed by only token and sporadic resistance. The Marines went ashore first and were followed up by the Army's 7th Division the next day.

It was not until X Corps had taken the port of Inchon, leaving the mopping up to a South Korean Marine unit, that any serious opposition was encountered. There was a sharp fight on the road to Seoul, but by now it was too late. The Americans had offloaded plenty of armoured support of their own, they had total command of the air, and the 1st Marine Division was composed of much better troops than those encountered by Kim's forces back in July.

By the 25 September, Almond's troops were fighting for the capital itself. Although all major North Korean units had by now fled north, they did leave behind several die-hard infantry regiments, with orders to contest every block. MacArthur had famously refused to use air support in his assault on Manila in 1945, but he now showed no such scruples. In a horrifying and destructive push for the centre, much of the city was turned to rubble. Hundreds of civilians died.

Worse was to follow, as the returning South Korean security forces rounded up thousands of suspected Communist sympathizers. Several hundred of these were murdered by the South Korean police over the ensuing weeks, massacres which still spark controversy in modern South Korea. Against explicit orders from the Joint Chiefs, MacArthur orchestrated a showy liberation ceremony with Syngman Rhee on the 29th. The politics were sensitive here. A display of American triumphalism alongside a politician whose democratic and moral credentials were doubtful did not play well with the allies.

Two hundred and fifty miles further south, General Walker had launched a cautious offensive out of his Pusan lines on 16 September, the day after the Inchon landing. After steady and well-planned attacks against North Korean forces along the Naktong river, by the 19th they were in full flight. The encircling units of Kim's army had proved brittle, and at the end of their capabilities. The UN 8th Army was able to pursue north up the peninsula against almost non-existent Communist resistance. It would not be long before they would link up with Almond's X Corps near Seoul.

MacArthur's double gamble at Inchon had paid off. The tactical gamble was that the Marines could pull off what would have been an extremely difficult assault, had Inchon been defended. The strategic one was that such a move would serve to collapse the Communist position at Pusan. He was at the height of his career, and at the height of his power. Militarily, his judgement had been bold and shrewd. Yet this most political of conflicts would ultimately expose his failure to grasp the subtleties of limited war.

October 1950: Moving North of the 38th Parallel

The liberation of Seoul and Walker's drive north immediately opened the question of whether or not the UN should continue their offensive into North Korea. The dividing border of the 38th Parallel lay only thirty miles north of Seoul – so in terms of simple military momentum this became quite pressing. The political momentum was also moving in the same direction.

During the bleak days of July and August, little thought had been given as to what might be done if the Communists were actually ejected from South Korea. Back then, simply surviving had been the obvious priority. With the reality of re-conquest and Kim's army in full retreat, the military logic pointed north. There was a moral imperative too, for in three months of war, UN forces had ample opportunity to witness the barbarism and war crimes that were commonplace in areas occupied by the Communists. Rhee's regime was hardly a benign democracy, but any dispassionate observer had to conclude that Kim's was far worse. Surely, some argued, these criminals should not be allowed to lick their wounds and prepare for their next invasion?

There were also broader questions to consider. For the time being at least, the fear of Soviet intervention was more subdued. Signals reaching the West from Moscow, where the intelligence was much more accurate than it was for Beijing, strongly suggested Stalin's wish to distance himself from the Korean debacle. As for the Chinese, they were largely regarded as a tool of the Kremlin. Communism was seen as a monolithic international conspiracy. By this reasoning, if Moscow appeared to be edging back from its commitment to North Korea, then China would do so too. In fact, China was to prove the greater threat. But Western countries did not have well-developed intelligence gathering systems in Communist China. As a new regime, totalitarian in complexion and with an alien culture, China was very difficult for the West to read.

This complacent thinking was reinforced by the sense of success and optimism which arose from the new military situation. It was understandable if Western politicians, on the brink of catastrophe in early September, were now delighted at the defeat of the North Korean army and guilty of a measure of naivety as to the likelihood of Chinese intervention.

At the United Nations, the presence of Russia on the Security Council effectively neutralized that avenue for policy making. On 7 October the British secured a General Assembly resolution broadly supporting UN action to establish a united and free Korea. This was useful public relations, but did not have the authority of a Security Council decision. The stasis on the Security Council meant that effective decision-making now passed to Washington.

MacArthur was told that he could operate north of the 38th, but that UN troops (as opposed to South Korean ones) were to be kept well away from the Chinese border. This was another example of limited war in practice. It was hoped that exercising restraint in this way would signal that the United Nations (or more realistically, the USA) did not intend to threaten China. Despite the euphoria, Truman's Administration, therefore, remained prudent. ROK (Republic of Korea – i.e. South Korean) troops had probed north of the parallel as early as 28 September, but MacArthur knew that if he were to destroy the North Korean army, he would need to use US and allied units. He now made another unconventional command decision which to this day is the subject of much debate.

X Corps would continue to report directly to MacArthur, but it would be extracted from its position in western Korea and moved by sea to Wonsan, on the east coast. Walker's army would take responsibility for the offensive north of Seoul and then drive to the northwest. X Corps, only half the size of the 8th Army, would have responsibility for the offensive towards the northeast. The mountains in the middle of the country would mean that communications between the two commands would be tenuous and so a double thrust was logical. What was peculiar was the differing weight given to the two offensives and the decision to move Almond's corps across to the other side of the country. This implied a tangle of logistical, command and transport problems which would take weeks to sort out. Indeed, X Corps' move was designed to be a second amphibious outflanking. Yet by the time they arrived at Wonsan, the advancing South Korean Army had already cleared the area. The explanation probably lay in MacArthur's

fondness for flamboyant assaults from the sea, coupled with his wariness of Walker as an offensive general.

Such switching of units might have exposed the United Nations to a swift counter-punch, but the shattered North Koreans did not have the wherewithal for that. On 9 October Walker's UN troops moved north of Seoul in force, encountering stiff resistance for a week or so. By now the United Nations, with its powerful air force and modern weaponry, completely outclassed the North Koreans. The line broke and the retreat became a rout. On the 19th he entered Pyongyang, the northern capital. For the time being, it was all going to plan.

Four days earlier, Truman had summoned MacArthur to a meeting at Wake island, in the middle of the Pacific. MacArthur had exceeded his orders on a number of occasions and habitually made public pronouncements which effectively tied the hands of his political masters. For example, he had called on the North Korean Army to surrender and threatened a full-scale UN invasion of the North, before such a move had been sanctioned. He was also confident that there was little possibility of a Chinese intervention and that if it did occur, the United Nations would be able to deal with it easily. But instead of pulling him into line, Truman acquiesced in MacArthur's complacent analysis of the military situation. Neither man knew that the day after Walker's troops had crossed the parallel, Mao had issued orders for Chinese 'volunteers' to resist the UN advance.

China Intervenes

Phase 1: The Initial Chinese Offensive, October–November 1950

In late October 1950, the Chinese Army intervened in the Korean War by attacking UN forces in North Korea. This 'First Phase' of the Chinese offensive ended after less than two weeks, with American and South Korean units pushed back. UN commanders took a long time to appreciate that they were now fighting the Chinese. Not only that, they would discover that in these early clashes, the Chinese outfought the United Nations with ease.

From 13 October, about 130,000 Chinese troops had been infiltrating across the Yalu river. These were not irregulars, they were fully organized infantry divisions. They were operating in five armies (corps-sized units by Western convention) under the command of Marshal Peng Dehuai. Lightly equipped and moving by night, the Chinese managed to avoid detection by UN air reconnaissance. By the 25th, they were poised to attack.

The immediate purpose of this initial Chinese 'First Phase' operation appears to have been to secure bridgeheads across the river and room for manoeuvre on the southern side. More broadly, it may be that the Chinese intended to halt the UN advance by a demonstration of force. At the same time, they would have the opportunity to assess their own capabilities against a modern Western army.

Truman, MacArthur and other Western leaders had badly miscalculated Chinese motives. The USA's blockade of the sea around Taiwan had infuriated the regime in Beijing. It also allowed them to release Communist Chinese troops which until then had been deployed along the straits, pending a possible invasion of Taiwan. Many of these moved to Korea. The approach of American troops to the Chinese border was seen as a direct threat. Therefore, China's concern was not motivated by Communist ideology orchestrated by Moscow. It was old-fashioned consideration for national security – and Mao's regime was quite capable of taking its own decisions. It was not as if the allies had not been warned. There were overt messages sent to the USA via both the Indian government and the British. China also made public statements about her interests in North Korea. Perhaps the message needed to be rammed home more forcefully.

First contact with Chinese troops was near the banks of the Yalu to the northwest, where the ROK II Corps was badly mauled and pushed into a hurried retreat. By the first days of November, Walker had inserted the American 1st Cavalry Division in its place. He had underestimated the size of the threat and still doubted that these were actually Chinese regulars. They were exactly that – properly trained and organized army formations, rather than a guerilla band. The over-stretched Americans were sent reeling backwards, infantry battalions unable to cope with huge massed infantry assaults from all sides.

For the first time, Chinese MiG15 jets were identified flying sorties over the Yalu. Unlike the aircraft deployed earlier by the North Koreans, the MiGs were vastly superior to most UN aircraft. It is likely that from this time as well, some of them had Russian pilots. Just when it was needed the most, allied air power found itself challenged for superiority. Walker's command began to fall apart. He had no choice but to retreat in an effort to restore order. Over on the east it was a similar story. Moving up towards the Chosin reservoir near the Chinese border, the ROK I Corps was stopped in its tracks.

Russian ground crew attend to a MiG15 in China during the Korean War (Image by Rusoargentino)

Luckily for South Korea and her allies, the Chinese offensive halted almost as suddenly as it had begun. By 7 November the front was quiet. For ten days, UN and South Korean soldiers had been comprehensively outfought by what were now positively identified as Chinese regulars. The Chinese had made good use of the UN dependence on roads and heavy equipment, as well as their numerical superiority. Moving by night, infiltrating along ridge lines and then attacking en masse with astonishing bravery, these were difficult tactics to counter. With a lull in the fighting, the allies now had the chance to take stock and draw lessons from their first encounter with Communist China.

Phase 2: The United Nations Is Pushed Back, November–December 1950

Between late November and the end of 1950, a planned UN offensive across the entire front quickly turned into a chaotic UN retreat. The allies bumped into the 'Second Phase' Chinese offensive, which carried all before it. In the west, Walker's army collapsed. In the east, Almond's troops fared slightly better, but were pulled out anyway to reinforce Walker. By the end of the year the United Nations would be staring defeat in the face.

Surprisingly, the allied strategic and political blindness had continued after the Chinese 'First Phase' offensive. Both military and political leaders managed to convince themselves that China's action was nothing much to worry about. The battles of early November were seen as an effort at face-saving, merely a demonstration. China had shot her bolt, and did not have the means for further offensive action in Korea. One more push and her army would collapse, as had that of North Korea.

It is difficult not to suspect a dash of cultural arrogance and racism here. China was still widely regarded as a backward peasant society, completely ill-equipped for modern war. This was to ignore the experience of the previous two weeks, when the Chinese had shown what a 'peasant' army could do. Besides which, many of Mao's veterans had well over ten years' combat experience.

The upshot of this misjudgement was a renewed allied offensive, to kick off on both fronts on 24 November. In one of the great ironies of the war, it was to be called 'Operation Home by Christmas'. With uncanny timing, MacArthur's new offensive was scheduled to coincide precisely with a renewed

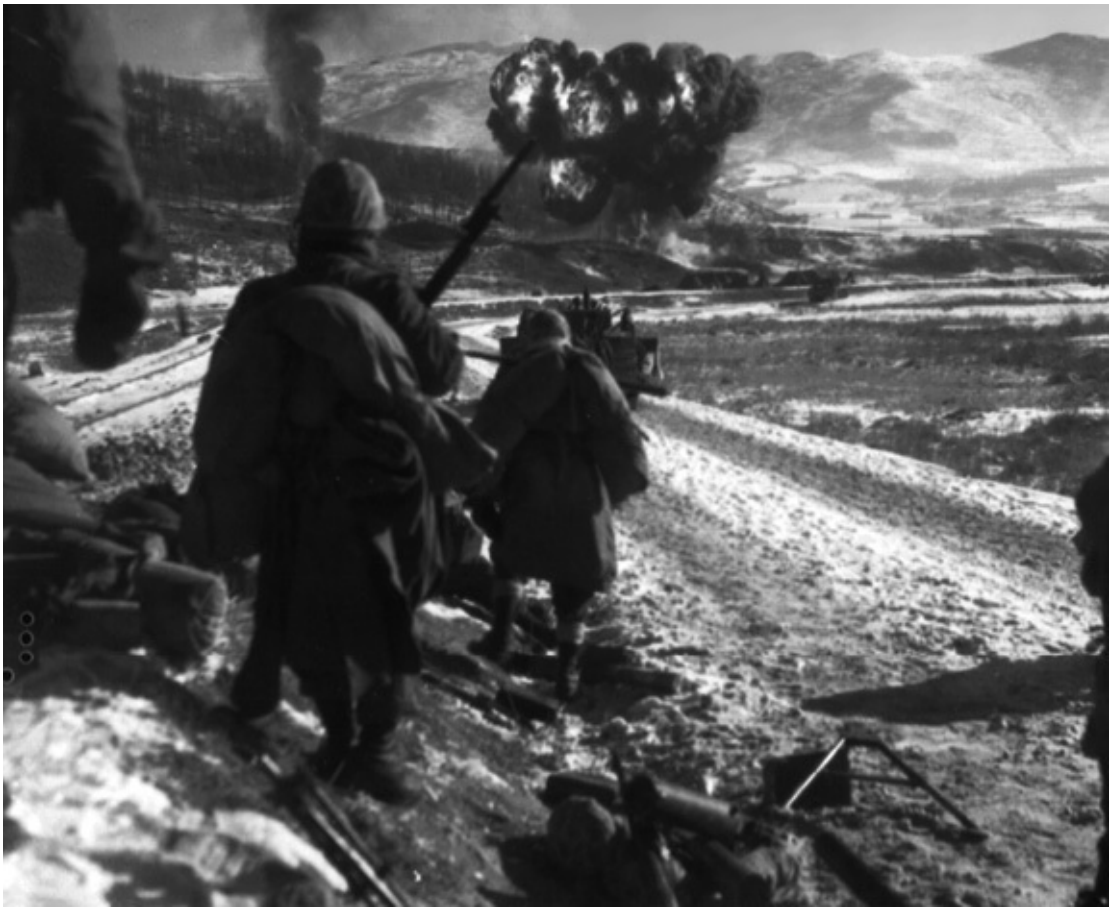
attack by the Chinese. Their offensive, since recorded by them as the 'Second Phase' of their Korean operation, would dwarf the one of only three weeks earlier. Less than twenty-four hours after pushing forward for what they were told would be the final campaign of the war, Walker's and Almond's troops ran in to a huge Chinese assault right across the line. The ten Chinese divisions which had attacked in October were now swollen to thirty.

It was Walker's 8th Army and their UN and South Korean allies who would take the fiercest beating at the hands of the Chinese. The pattern was much as it had been earlier, with clever infantry-based tactics used to capitalize on Chinese advantages. The tactical problem for the Americans continued to be that their troops were not well trained for all-round defence and were heavily dependent on the roads. In this mountainous terrain, a typical situation would see the Americans attempting to fall back along a valley road, while the nimble Chinese would be along the ridge lines, ambushing and attacking from all sides. Battalion headquarters were overrun and fierce hand-to-hand fighting became commonplace, often at night. The weather was atrocious, and few on either side were accustomed to living outside in sub-zero conditions.

The ROK II Corps and US 2nd Division were routed, losing tons of equipment and thousands of men. On Walker's western front, only the gritty Turkish brigade held firm, fighting a brilliant two-day defensive action against overwhelming odds. Their sacrifice enabled the rest of the army to slip through the Chinese noose.

This was to prove the longest retreat in US history, and one of her most catastrophic defeats. By 5 December, Pyongyang was lost, and by the middle of the month the allies had tumbled back across the 38th Parallel. Now Seoul itself was in jeopardy. It was only the motorization of allied forces that enabled them to keep ahead of the foot-bound Chinese and to maintain some semblance of order. The United Nations had paid a high price for miscalculating China's intentions and then underrating her military capability. For the Americans, in particular, this was a military humiliation on the scale of Pearl Harbor. It seemed that UN credibility, the notion of collective security and the ability of the USA to project power abroad were all unravelling simultaneously. Truman's presidency as well hung in the balance.

Over in the east, Almond's X Corps was badly battered but managed to execute a more orderly withdrawal. In another controversial decision, MacArthur had insisted on its two American divisions splitting up, with the 1st Marines striking directly north towards the Chosin reservoir and the 7th Infantry moving northwest. Although the 7th escaped largely unscathed, the Marines were hit hard. Resolute command control and discipline kept the column together as it retraced its steps, effectively 'attacking in the opposite direction', cutting its way back down towards the coast. Together with two ROK divisions and a small group of British commandos, Almond's corps was now isolated, defending the port of Hungnam. This ad hoc Hungnam garrison could probably have clung on, representing a useful bridgehead behind enemy lines, but the troops were badly needed to buttress Walker's 8th Army in the west. On 11 December, the men of X Corps began climbing aboard transport ships to be ferried around the peninsula yet again. Disembarking at Pusan, they were rushed north by train and truck to form a consolidated UN defence.



'Attacking in the opposite direction' – US Marines receive air support as they pull back from the Chosin reservoir in December 1950 (Image by US Defense Department)

December was the bleakest of months for the UN war effort. It seemed nothing could or would go well. A worried British team, headed by Prime Minister Clement Attlee, arrived in Washington on the 4th. The British spoke not only for themselves, but also for the French, Australians and others. They knew that the Americans were considering direct attacks on China, a naval blockade or even the use of atomic weapons. They feared another world war or, more prosaically, that such action against China simply would not work. Truman and his advisors listened to their allies, but were able to offer only limited assurances.

Days later, early feelers for the possibility of a ceasefire were extended. A special Chinese Communist delegation attended the Security Council on the 12th. It soon became clear, however, that the Chinese, flushed with success, were now thinking in terms of a united Communist Korea. That was too high a price to pay for the West. On the 16th, President Truman declared a national state of emergency. On the 22nd, as Almond's X Corps burnt its supplies and loaded its remaining troops on to the ships in Hungnam harbour, China rejected a UN ceasefire proposal.

The frontline had now seemingly stabilized along the 38th Parallel, and Walker was hopeful that he could hold his new position. He would not live to find out. On 23 December he was on a trip to hand out Christmas presents and medals to American and British troops. As was his custom, Walker had asked his driver to hurry along. Passing a column of lorries, their jeep was involved in a head-on collision with a lorry coming the other way. Walker was thrown from the vehicle and killed instantly.

Paratroop General Matthew Ridgway was nominated as his replacement. Before Ridgway had arrived in the theatre, the Chinese had crossed the 38th. When he did fly in on the 26th, he found a completely demoralized command. The pace of the Chinese offensive had clearly slackened, but it was likely that this

was more about moving supplies and reinforcements forward than it was a genuine halt. On New Year's Day, the Chinese 'Third Phase' offensive began.

Phases 3 and 4: General Ridgway's Riposte, January and February 1951

The seesaw fighting that characterized the following three months in Korea may be regarded as the tactical turning point of the war, if not the strategic one. When it was over, although the Chinese Army remained a powerful threat, there was the clear sense that the UN forces now had their measure. There would be plenty more intensive fighting to come, but never again did it seem possible that UN ground forces in Korea would simply disintegrate.

Over the ensuing weeks, Matthew Ridgway was able to rebuild UN morale and establish a tactical system which would prove an effective counter to the massed attacks which had unhinged Walker's army. This feat of leadership took place against the backdrop of yet another huge offensive.

For the first few weeks of the new year the Chinese divisions continued to roll forward. Although the Chinese bore the brunt of the fighting for the Communist side, North Korean formations were by now reappearing on the frontline. Kim's broken divisions had been remanned and re-equipped inside China, a pattern that was to persist for the remainder of the war.

The 8th Army had not had sufficient time to fortify their hasty line along the parallel and a retreat was inevitable. Seoul fell to the Communists for the second time. Ridgway held a new line from Pyongtaek on the west coast to Samchok on the east, across the most narrow belt of the peninsula. By the middle of the month, the momentum seemed to be sapping from the Chinese assault. With the arrival of Almond's troops from Hungnam, the Americans chanced several local counter-attacks. Their main purpose was psychological: to keep the Chinese off balance but, fundamentally, to rebuild morale on the allied side. As January drew to a close, contact with the enemy was sporadic. Once again, it seemed, the Chinese had exhausted their logistics.

Mid-February saw renewed Chinese attacks (the 'Fourth Phase') in the centre of the UN line at Hoengseong and Chipyong-ni. The American 2nd Division, almost destroyed only two months earlier, held its ground. In a classic defensive engagement alongside the French battalion, the allies threw off assaults by vastly superior enemy forces.

Ridgway's doctrine was already having its effect, for there was something different about the manner in which the United Nations now fought. Ridgway introduced tactics to capitalize on UN advantages – firepower and mobility. He had begun to initiate battles of offensive attrition. Their chief purpose was to inflict high casualties on the enemy, rather than to gain ground. In this stance in early 1951, there is a hint of a new mindset in the Allied command. This is the notion that while it may not be possible to win the war in traditional terms, an alternative objective, of wearing down the enemy's forces, might bear fruit. The tactics themselves entailed limited attacks to draw the enemy into pre-designated fire zones, in which the UN's powerful artillery and air force could be brought to bear.

Within two weeks, Ridgway had launched Operations Killer and Ripper, wrenching the initiative from the Chinese. By the end of the month, the allies were again fighting in the suburbs of Seoul.

Notwithstanding Ridgway's tactical cunning, the fight to retake Seoul would be another bitter struggle in the rubble of the capital. The city was secured again by the middle of the month, and the United Nations continued to press forward. By now the Chinese, having absorbed extremely high casualties, were showing evidence of a slightly more conservative and flexible defence. They were ready to surrender terrain rather than await the full UN onslaught. The UN advance became steady, but assured and technical.

By the end of the month, South Korea was cleared of Communist forces and the United Nations had inched back across the 38th.

The dilemmas of September, now even more heavily freighted with political considerations, represented themselves. Should the United Nations reinvade the North? Was it still feasible to conquer the North and reunite Korea, or would that precipitate World War Three?

The Fall of MacArthur

It was now that the tensions which had simmered beneath the surface of the political and military leaderships within the United Nations came to a head. This was to be a classic example of political versus military control. The Korean War stood as a turning point in the evolution of this debate, as it demonstrated that the concept of 'limited' war depended on close political control of the military. The only alternative was total war – and that entailed much greater risks of which, understandably, politicians were very wary.

For MacArthur, as he was later to express it, there was 'no substitute for victory'. He advocated an advance into North Korea accompanied by the bombing of China and, if necessary, the use of atomic weapons. For him, at some stage, the West would need to confront global communism militarily. It might as well be now, while they retained a significant nuclear advantage. If the Korean War spiralled into World War Three, so be it.

Although Truman and his advisors had given serious consideration to all of these options, their conclusion was to continue with a limited war. Its aim would be to put sufficient pressure on the Chinese and North Koreans so as to secure a peace treaty based on the pre-war borders. Hope of a unified Korea had evaporated. The intervention of China had demonstrated that the only means of securing the whole peninsula would be either the full mobilization of the USA's war fighting capability – on the scale of the Second World War – or the use of atomic weapons, or both. Such a strategy would likely escalate into world war. If it did, there was every chance that the Soviet Union would overrun the rest of Europe. The USA's allies were totally opposed to escalation and the coalition may have begun to unravel. When examined in this way, the realistic choices for Truman became quite limited.

MacArthur's position might have been secured had he not repeatedly aired his views in public. He also used his position to escalate the war on the ground without political authority. On 29 December, he had been warned by Washington that the Administration was opposed to provoking a global conflict and that there would be no more reinforcements for Korea. His view was that without them, the United Nations would be ejected from the peninsula. In this sense, Ridgway's halting of the Chinese advance proved MacArthur wrong. Furthermore, his development of attritional tactics gave Truman the means to fight a successful 'limited' war.

Truman got the excuse he needed on 5 April. Representative Joe Martin read out a letter he had received from MacArthur in the US House of Representatives. It showed beyond all doubt that MacArthur was completely out of step with Administration war policy. Truman easily persuaded the Joint Chiefs to back his decision to dismiss MacArthur, unanimously. The grounds were that he was not in sympathy with Administration strategy. A press leak meant that the handling of the dismissal was clumsy and MacArthur's huge ego was badly bruised. By 12 April, Ridgway was in command of UN forces in Korea. Lieutenant General James Van Fleet was appointed to command the 8th Army.

The news was greeted with unconcealed enthusiasm around the world, particularly in those other countries which were supporting the UN war effort. Only in the USA itself did MacArthur enjoy any genuine support. When he arrived in New York, he was greeted with the biggest ticker tape parade the

city had ever seen. Now leading an unpopular Administration, Truman had to put up with MacArthur's grand-standing. Yet within two months, he would be vindicated: despite more arrogant posturing from MacArthur, a committee of the Senate found him to have disobeyed orders and breached the US Constitution.

Phase 5: Chinese Spring Offensive, April–June 1951

The spring of 1951 saw another big push by the Chinese, in an attempt to unhinge the allied line in the west and recapture Seoul. Between late April and late June 1951, the United Nations successfully fought off repeated attacks, albeit with some difficulty. By the end of this period the military lines crystallized into a military stalemate which would last until the end of the war. The Chinese Spring Offensive was to prove the last period of mobile warfare in Korea.

Ridgway had been in overall command for less than two weeks when the offensive began on 22 April. Half a million Chinese troops surged forward, attacking the Kansas line to the north and east of the capital. Retrospectively, the Chinese described this as the fifth and final phase of their offensive campaign in Korea.

Their nocturnal 'human wave' tactics were now familiar to the allies, but unnerving nonetheless. The Chinese remained adept at evading allied air reconnaissance and infiltrating positions without detection. In many places the UN line was thinly held, and local retreats became necessary. The British 29th Brigade, with its attached Belgian battalion, was caught badly out of position on the Imjin river. Despite this, the four isolated units fought a series of skilful rearguard actions. These engagements mauled the attacking Chinese 19th Army and bought time for UN reinforcements to establish a line behind them. The 'Glorious Glosters' – a proud county regiment – were surrounded and annihilated, having fought off repeated assaults for forty-eight hours.

Like those before it, this Chinese 'Fifth Phase' offensive ran out of steam in the face of high casualties and a now well-practised UN response, relying on huge volumes of supporting fire. Van Fleet's army had surrendered about thirty miles of ground; however, Seoul remained safely in allied hands.

The Chinese were not done yet, however. Once more they used the lull in the fighting to build up their reserves of men and ammunition. China's reliance on manpower for their logistical effort meant that most material was literally carried by night on primitive A-frames, strapped to the backs of Korean porters (another aspect of the war which would be mirrored in Vietnam).

The last major Chinese offensive of the Korean War began on 15 May 1951. This is recorded by them as the 'second impulse of the Fifth Phase'. All told, there were twenty-one Chinese and nine North Korean divisions involved. The main thrust was against the South Korean III Corps, which proved unable to resist the onslaught. Van Fleet coolly switched units into the line to replace the shattered South Koreans and although ground was again ceded, there was no panic. Once more, the rehabilitated US 2nd Division demonstrated competence and courage in stemming the advance. It was all over within five days. This time, the Chinese armies really were exhausted. The United Nations claimed to have inflicted 90,000 casualties during this period. Surely exaggerated, this nonetheless gives some indication of the kind of punishment they were now meting out.

With a keen appreciation of the Chinese situation, Van Fleet moved to the offensive. Operation Piledriver pushed the weakened Chinese and North Korean units back into North Korea, allowing Van Fleet's troops the luxury of selecting the best ground to consolidate and defend. For although they were now meeting weak and ineffectual resistance, the UN forces were not about to drive deeply into the North. That was not the ambition here. They had blunted the Chinese offensive and secured ground to their liking,

inside enemy territory. Now they would sit and wait. It was mid-June 1951. The great stalemate had begun.

Entrenched: Peace Talks and Military Stalemate

Initial Peace Talks, July–August 1951

The first round of peace talks during the Korean War was to prove a frustrating failure. Their breakdown at the end of August was to lead to more fierce fighting before the two sides agreed to sit down again in October.

The interplay of military and political perceptions had entered a new phase by the summer of 1951, as China was forced to reappraise her position. Whereas only six months earlier the performance of Chinese formations in North Korea had persuaded Truman that the war could not be won by the United Nations in conventional terms, the same kind of calculation was now forced upon Mao and the Chinese leadership.

China had made a substantial commitment to the war in Korea. If in October 1950 her objective had been to push UN forces away from her border, by December she had been so successful that she was thinking in terms of conquering the South. Now, though, the limitations of the Chinese war machine had been exposed – by a UN army which had learnt through bitter experience and Ridgway's inspired leadership. Horrendous losses and the logistical difficulty of maintaining offensive momentum meant that China no longer had the means to drive the United Nations south. They had tried, and both sides had been forced to amend their war aims because of their experiences thus far. Both were now being pushed towards the same resolution – a negotiated settlement along the lines of the pre-war situation. Strategic deadlock had precluded a more decisive result. Yet it would take two more years of war to secure a ceasefire on that basis. At the same time, as negotiations for a ceasefire began, a tactical stalemate was to develop which would mirror the strategic one. The battlefield would become mired in First World War-style trench warfare, making local breakthroughs difficult. This tactical impasse was the direct product of a third stalemate: that across the negotiating table.

It was the Russians who proposed new talks, with a diplomatic initiative on 23 June 1951. By now it was clear that the United Nations was prepared to accept a settlement based on the 38th Parallel. Indeed, the Secretary General had said as much three weeks earlier. The Chinese too seemed anxious to talk. The two delegations met at the town of Kaesong in early July.

The next five weeks were to prove a frustrating learning period for the UN negotiating team. Two themes would characterize the Chinese and North Korean demeanour at these early meetings. In terms of substance, it seemed that the Communists were expecting some kind of UN capitulation. No terms that might have been remotely acceptable to the United Nations were put forward. As debates took place, the Communists adopted pedantic delaying tactics, arguing about seating, the order of the agenda, anything which might serve to waste time. There were endless adjournments while such trivial issues were sorted out. The second aspect of their enemy's behaviour, which surprised the UN delegation, was to do with propaganda. At every turn of the discussion, the Communists would shout and rant, making extreme and dogmatic allegations, which were hardly conducive to constructive diplomacy. This was for external dissemination, of course. The Communist propaganda machine was in full swing.

The United Nations had made a naive error in agreeing to the rules of engagement for the peace talks. To the Communists, the talks were simply another facet of the war. They had managed to persuade the United Nations to meet in an area which was firmly under their control. They stage-managed the entire

farcical procedure and succeeded in buying themselves over a month in which to fortify their new positions in the field.

When the talks broke down in August, Van Fleet's troops faced an entrenched enemy with plentiful artillery, newly arrived from China. A tactical military stalemate had been achieved on the back of the contrived stalemate at the talks. Or not quite: despite the difficulties of assaulting such strengthened positions, Ridgway was determined that the United Nations should demonstrate its military superiority.

The United Nations initiated a series of pitched battles for control of the Hwachon reservoir, which, if they could grab it, would finally secure adequate water and electricity for Seoul. The fighting became a test of wills between both sides. Important features such as Heartbreak Ridge and Pork Chop Hill exchanged hands at great cost. For all of their new artillery and entrenchments, the Chinese and North Koreans were ejected by October, leaving the United Nations in complete control of the area. Once again, Communist forces had sustained staggering casualties. Even now, their armies were infantry-heavy and hugely vulnerable to UN firepower.

The costly battles for the reservoir were an early example of the ghastly feedback loop that linked into the negotiating process. When the butcher's bill became too high, the Chinese would seek more talks. They now resumed at Panmunjom, in late October.

Talks at Panmunjom – and Further Military Stalemate, October–December 1951

Panmunjom, which twenty-one months later would witness the ceasefire which ended the Korean War, really was a neutral venue: it lay between the lines of the two armies and there was thus less scope for the Communists to orchestrate events. This was not to say, though, that their negotiation would be any less manipulative. In discussion with Washington, Ridgway had agreed to limit UN military activity for thirty days. His forces would be confined to patrolling and defending the 'Military Line of Resistance'. No significant activity would be allowed to take place without his personal approval. The idea was to tempt the Communists into doing a deal – they were offered the thirty days as a sweetener. If no treaty was signed within the timeframe, the United Nations would feel free to resume full-scale war.

In a depressing rerun of the Kaesong charade, the Communists again used this period to fortify their lines. This time they went even further, with deep tunnels, underground barracks, miles of barbed wire and defence in depth. Now the front truly resembled the First World War. An assault on such positions would be possible, but Van Fleet and Ridgway knew that it would cost the kind of casualties that Western governments were not prepared to accept. A full tactical stalemate was, therefore, now in place. The frontline in Korea would barely move for the remainder of the war.

Frustrated at this latest turn of events, the Americans began to exert pressure from the air. The bombing of North Korea was stepped up. Logistics centres, railways, troop concentrations. The trouble was that without moving across the Yalu, there was a limit to the amount of damage that the air force could actually inflict. The law of diminishing returns was very much in effect. Yet Truman would not yield to his air force commanders: the war would remain confined to Korea.

Beginnings of a Peace Deal

As 1951 moved into 1952, the bones of a peace deal began to emerge. In essence, the existing frontline would be frozen in place. Yet one huge and seemingly intractable obstacle presented itself. The two sides could not agree about the repatriation of prisoners.

The point at issue was those prisoners who might choose not to return to their countries of origin. A December survey revealed that more than half of the Chinese and North Korean prisoners held by the United Nations wished to remain in the South or go to another non-Communist country. This did not speak well of the marvels of communism. The United Nations, particularly the USA and Britain, wished to avoid the kind of betrayal which had followed the Yalta Conference in 1945. At Yalta, Stalin had insisted that thousands of Russians be repatriated against their will. Many of these were later murdered. From February 1952 until the end of October, the talks stalled on this issue. In December 1952, the Red Cross proposed the exchange of the sick, which the Communists at first turned down flat, although this small exchange was later implemented.

It was not until the spring of 1953 that the two sides began to meet again regularly, and to inch forward on this question. During this period the Communists managed to turn the UN prison camps on Koje-do island into a second front. The camps were poorly managed, staffed by rear echelon American and South Korean troops. Exploiting this situation, hard-line Communists were infiltrated into them and given free rein to organize the inmates into violent and confrontational bands. The resulting press coverage was highly embarrassing to the UN cause.

The political background, both in the USA and South Korea, was also changing. Rhee consolidated his power in rigged elections in 1952. He was becoming increasingly intractable, refusing to countenance the continued division of Korea and threatening to carry on the war unilaterally if the United Nations struck a deal. Behind the scenes, the Americans developed contingency plans of their own. When it came to the final ceasefire, they had given secret undertakings to the Communists that the United Nations would in no way support a new offensive by South Korea.

Meanwhile the war dragged on. It was a war of artillery duels, trench raids and nerves. At night the airwaves would be flooded with laughable propaganda from the Communists. A war weariness had set in, with little support or interest among the domestic audience in the West. People just wanted to get it over with. General Mark Clark replaced Ridgway in May 1952, and Van Fleet stepped aside for General Maxwell Taylor in February 1953, but the military challenge was over. The most demanding problems the two new generals would face would be political.

Political Change in the USA

The American presidential election of November 1952 was fought, among other issues, in this context. Truman had declined to stand for a third term, leaving Adlai Stevenson to contest the poll for the Democrats. Eisenhower had comfortably secured the Republican nomination against, among others, Douglas MacArthur. During the ensuing campaign he attempted to defuse the issue of Korea by stating that he would ‘go to Korea’. It seemed to do the trick, as Eisenhower won comfortably. As President Elect he visited Clark, Van Fleet and Rhee later that month. The two generals got the impression that Eisenhower simply wanted a quick way out, rather than a genuine exploration of war options. The meeting with Rhee was frosty – the old man stubbornly clinging on to his notions of a united Korea.

Behind the scenes, however, Eisenhower’s determination to end the war quickly had a steely quality, which was not lost on the Chinese. In this he was abetted by John Foster Dulles, his hawkish Secretary of State. With the Americans having developed tactical nuclear weapons by early 1953, Eisenhower sent a direct threat to the Chinese in May: settle the war immediately or face an attack on China itself. In parallel, his Administration had spent millions in building up the ROK Army since the beginning of the year. As the talks entered what would be their final stage, the US Air Force began to attack strategic dams in North Korea, vital to the agricultural economy. Eisenhower was turning the screw.

Ceasefire: July 1953

When Eisenhower took office in January 1953, the military and political stalemate in Korea had dragged on for eighteen months. There had been little meaningful dialogue between the two sides since February 1952. The static trench war had continued, as had the American bombing campaign. Little changed during the first months of 1953, apart from Eisenhower ramping up the pressure on the Chinese. But within two months of his nuclear threat in May, a ceasefire would be signed and the troops would start to come home.

It seems likely that Eisenhower's ultimatum actually pushed against an open door, although it undoubtedly served to focus minds. China was weary of the war and both she and Russia were aware of the USA's new nuclear dominance. Dean Rusk's announced policy of 'Massive Retaliation' had a recklessness about it that brooked no argument. By early June 1953, both sides were ready for a compromise on the question of prisoners as well. The wild card, which nearly succeeded in sabotaging the entire process, was Syngman Rhee.

On 18 June Rhee unilaterally released 25,000 North Korean prisoners, all of whom had indicated their preference for remaining in the South. This was contrary to the draft ceasefire. This called for a period of discussion with such people, under the auspices of India acting as a neutral party. Clark and Eisenhower were furious. Meanwhile at the front, the Chinese had launched a 100,000 man offensive, targeted specifically at five South Korean divisions. Even after significant American upgrade, the ROK Army was brittle, barely capable of holding its own against the Communists. In this the last major engagement of the war, the South Koreans were forced back some five miles.

It was only the introduction of massive American air and artillery support that stabilized the situation. The Communists, as always, had endured extremely severe casualties. Rhee, it seemed, had got the message. He would not be a party to the ceasefire; at its conclusion, there was no question of a South Korean assault on the North.

The signing of the ceasefire on 27 July was a dull piece of theatre. The United Nations was represented by Lieutenant General William Harrison, China and North Korea by General Nam Il. The two parties walked into the room, signed the paperwork and withdrew. There was no discussion, no saluting and no handshake. Rather, a sense of bitterness and inevitability pervaded the ceremony. It was all over in twelve minutes. That still left nearly twelve hours of war to be fought. As 10pm approached, both sides let rip with a furious artillery barrage, the ultimate testimony to the folly of war. But at ten precisely, all firing stopped. Dazed UN and Chinese troops fraternized awkwardly in no man's land. The shooting war in Korea was, at least for now, over.

Other Developments in the Korean War

There was, of course, much more to the Korean War than the big picture represented by lines on the map and debate in Washington and Beijing. It was a multi-faceted conflict which blighted the lives of millions and brought with it developments in all aspects of warfare.

The Air War

The air war over Korea was to witness the first jet versus jet combat and the extensive use of helicopters. Having swept aside the North Korean Air Force during the early days of the war, the US Air Force and her allies had unchallenged command of the air until the appearance of the Chinese MiGs at the end of 1950. In the dogfights that ensued, it was only the F-86 Sabre which was able to match the MiG15. The Americans never had more than 200 Sabres in theatre at any given time, while Communist strength climbed to 800 MiGs. Despite this, the Americans maintained an impressive kill ratio and never lost overall superiority. It did mean that the bombers required escorts and there were casualties. But pilot training and quality gave the Americans the edge. Fortunately for the United Nations – and in another example of the use of restraint in this limited war – the Communists based their MiGs in China. Their use was, therefore, confined to North Korea and the Chinese border.

Other aspects of air support – notably helicopter-based medevac and air-sea rescue – reached levels of efficiency undreamt of in the Second World War. On the downside, the claims of the air force generals that they could win the war proved as hollow as they had during the 1940s, or would in Vietnam. Especially in a rural Asian setting, there were clear limits as to what air power could achieve.

The Naval War

At sea, the United Nations did not have to worry about Chinese or North Korean naval units. There was a brief one-sided engagement between the Royal Navy and some small North Korean gunboats in July 1950, but that put paid to such threat as there was. An important learning point from the war was the threat posed by Soviet mine technology: the Americans lost several ships in attempting to clear Wonsan harbour in October 1950. The navies routinely provided gunfire support to ground forces and shuttled them from port to port or beach as required. The most innovative use of naval power was in the deployment of aircraft carriers. Much was learnt about the difficulties of maintaining high-tempo air operations at sea, as Britain and the USA kept carriers on station throughout the conflict. In the case of the USA's naval jets, the huge fuel requirements caused a rethink concerning ranges and aircraft types. The Americans also adopted the British angled flight deck as a result of experience in Korea.

Irregular Warfare

Perhaps the one aspect of the war in Korea which did not become as prominent as it might was irregular, or guerilla, warfare. There had been a problem with Communist guerrillas in the South before June 1950, but this had largely been brought under control. After the South had tasted Communist rule in 1950, little

sympathy remained for the North once the United Nations had regained the country at the end of that year. Rhee's regime was not pleasant, but the people in the South were not minded to give succour to a Vietcong equivalent. As for the North, the regime was so totalitarian and oppressive that any kind of domestic opposition was suicidal. Unlike the Vietnam War ten years later, the Korean War would be fought mostly as a conventional, large unit conflict – and in this, the USA may have been fortunate.

Propaganda and Intelligence

The use of propaganda reached new levels in Korea, though to doubtful effect. Both sides dropped leaflets and used radio broadcasts routinely. Much of the material was patently implausible and, therefore, ineffective. China claimed that the USA had been using biological weapons – and does so to this day. A team of left-leaning British academics travelled to China to endorse these claims. It later transpired that they had not undertaken any independent research of their own. The Russians, who had been party to the accusations at the time, later conceded that they were a fiction, but the use of the Western scientists had been shrewd. Notoriously, some allied prisoners were subjected to 'brainwashing' techniques while in Chinese hands. This practice was not as widespread as first reported and, like the propaganda, largely ineffectual.

The intelligence efforts of both sides did not produce the important results that they had in the Second World War. There was no 'Enigma' equivalent, whereby code-breakers would produce strategically important information. The North Koreans managed to miss the impending invasion at Inchon. Until quite late in the war, the Chinese were able to move large formations of troops over great distances, without their opponents becoming aware. Hundreds of brave souls served for the allies behind Communist lines, but few survived or provided useful information. These were boon years for the newly established CIA, however, which made the case for significant investment and has remained influential ever since. Overall, it may be that the cultural and political divide during the Korean War was such that reading the enemy was simply too difficult.

Changing Attitudes

Social attitudes to the Korean War varied by country and through time. In Korea itself, the people on both sides had little opportunity for democratic reflection on the conflict. Although the North was a ruthless totalitarian regime with full military conscription, such evidence as there is suggests popular support for the war throughout the period. Most were persuaded by the Communist doctrine and Nationalist sentiment fuelled the ambition to reunite the country. In China too there was little opportunity for dissent but equally little evidence of anti-war sentiment.

South Korea was a more pluralist society but not a thoroughly democratic one. Those opposed to Rhee's conduct of the war were mostly Communist sympathizers – and if not, were treated as such. These were dangerous views to express. Besides, this was a national emergency. As such, within the South as the North, the ordinary people struggled to survive as best they could. Hostility towards North Korea and communism in general remained widespread, encouraged by Rhee's regime but also the experience of Communist occupation during 1950–1. Looking back, modern South Koreans overwhelmingly regard the war as a sacrifice which was worth making.

It was only in the Western democracies that popular opinion in any way questioned the continued prosecution of the war and began to influence policy makers. Even here, compared to the mass protests of the Vietnam era, anti-war sentiment was muted. In the USA, Truman's presidency was badly damaged by

perceived failures in Korea. But much of the criticism reflected MacArthur's view – that the USA should stop fighting with one arm tied behind its back. Outright opposition was limited to the far left, such as the American Communist Party, and a few isolationist politicians. Notwithstanding this, Eisenhower recognized that the issue was potentially problematic during the 1952 election and chose to neutralize it with his 'I shall go to Korea' speech. Of course, his real intention turned out to be an early American exit.

There was more widespread public concern in some of the other countries contributing to the UN war effort. At its outset, popular support was almost universal. But after the trials of 1950–1 and the seemingly intractable stalemate which followed, criticism became more commonplace. There was division within Britain's Labour Party, for example, even though a Labour government had first agreed to intervene. Left-wing journalists reported on the war in hostile terms. Much of the concern about continued involvement stemmed less from pacifism than it did from the austerity of the times in Europe. Australia too had a lively public debate about continued support for the war. For most people in the West however, the war was an irrelevance, a long way from home. Apathy and disinterest were far more pronounced than outright opposition. When the soldiers came home, many were saddened and surprised by this.

Public attitudes to the Korean War at the time serve to hint at the future. The low-level dissent which began to influence political leaders back then would become decisive during the Vietnam War and central to foreign policy making ever since. In the 1950s, however, the habit of supporting the national effort in time of war was still fairly deeply ingrained.

Casualties of War

The Korean People

Those who suffered the most in the Korean War were usually the ordinary people. There was massive dislocation from the first days of the conflict. Families were divided, never to see their loved ones again. It has been estimated that over a million people were destitute at any one time, scratching a living as best they could, sleeping in the open.

Both the North and South Koreans were guilty of appalling atrocities. It should not be forgotten that Rhee's violent repression of anyone with left-wing leanings pre-dated the war. Once hostilities began, many thousands of such people were rounded up, tortured or simply murdered. Modern estimates suggest that as many as 100,000 political prisoners were killed by Rhee's regime during the first weeks of the war. Some atrocities were witnessed or even stopped by UN forces and there is little, if any, evidence of UN troops being directly involved.

Most historians now agree that the conduct of the North Korean authorities was far worse. Intellectuals, landowners, businessmen and democratic sympathizers were butchered wherever they were found, imprisoned or 'disappeared'. So were their families and any others who might be suspected or accused. It is difficult to make relative judgements about such behaviour. Yet it seems clear that the numbers murdered by the North Koreans (Chinese forces have not been implicated in mass killings) were far higher than those killed by Rhee's regime. Five thousand civilians were murdered in the southern city of Taejon in the summer of 1950. This is one example of many. It is estimated that through the course of the war, the North Korean Army was responsible for 500,000 civilian deaths. Indeed, the fact that the flood of refugees was almost entirely a one-way process – from Communist-held areas to UN-held ones – speaks volumes.

While the full truth may never be known, the South Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission has undertaken commendable work in recent years in order to provide some closure to this issue.

Prisoners of War

For those soldiers who ended up in enemy hands during the Korean War, the experience could be extremely varied. The most dangerous moment for any POW is his capture, in the heat of combat, when tempers are volatile. The North Koreans, in particular, were notorious for murdering prisoners, but this was not unheard of even in the US Army.

Allied soldiers would consider themselves lucky if they were captured by the Chinese, as opposed to the North Koreans. The march north would be very tough, with many dying on the road. Conditions were primitive – but often no more so than those endured by the Chinese soldiers themselves. In the Chinese camps on the Yalu, food was scarce and of poor quality. Indoctrination was rife, with those who co-operated (or pretended to) given favourable treatment. Torture, especially of Allied officers, was commonplace. Survival seemed to depend mostly on willpower and team spirit. Survival rates among the Turks, British and US Marines were much higher than among regular American infantry, for example. This may have reflected the poor training of American infantry units at the outset of the war. When these men

were released, there was an outcry at what were perceived as the inhumane conditions in which they had been kept.

Things were often not much better in the UN camps themselves. Although food and hygiene were adequate, and although there was no systematic torture or indoctrination, the allies allowed themselves to lose control of the camps. By the end of 1952, the camps were being run by Communist fanatics; any prisoner hinting that he might prefer life in the West was likely to be ‘tried’ and ‘executed’. In May 1952, the inmates even managed to kidnap Brigadier General Francis Dodd, the commander of the camps. They secured humiliating concessions. Order was only restored towards the very end of the conflict, when the allies systematically separated the hardline Communists from the other prisoners. As has been seen, many of these chose to stay in South Korea or Taiwan. Among their counterparts on the Yalu, only twenty-one made the opposite decision, opting to live in Communist China. Most returned to the West shortly afterwards.

Korea Since 1953

Technically, the two Koreas remain at war. The agreement signed in July 1953 was no more than a ceasefire – it was not and is not a peace treaty. US troops still garrison the 38th Parallel with their South Korean allies. Since the ceasefire there have been numerous border incidents and security alerts of one kind or another. Although there was a marked thaw in relations during the 1990s, more recently the tension has climbed. In 2010 a North Korean submarine sank a South Korean destroyer, killing forty-six people. The North Koreans denied culpability but the evidence against them seems overwhelming. North Korea has tested ballistic missiles and has a nuclear capability. In 2013 she openly threatened the South, as well as the USA and Japan. She also asserted that she no longer intended to abide by the 1953 ceasefire. As of June 2013 the North has proposed new peace talks and so there is some hope of improvement.

To a degree, this attitude may be the product of the paranoid family dictatorship which has governed the North since the war. Kim Il Sung ruled until his death in 1994. His son Kim Jong-il followed him until his own death in 2011, to be followed in turn by his youngest son, Kim Jong-un. Jong-un seems to be something of a throwback to his grandfather. Many analysts attribute the new bellicose rhetoric to personal insecurity and a need to establish himself. There can be no doubt, though, that North Korea poses a major risk to the region, if only because it is so difficult to read.

Within the country, vast resources are expended on the military instead of conventional economic development. Famines have been responsible for millions of deaths, mainly due to economic mismanagement. In 2009, the World Food Programme estimated that 40 per cent of North Korea's factories were idle; the mismanagement continues. Personal freedom is non-existent and political control is exercised through a powerful leadership cult. In the face of UN sanctions, North Korea remains heavily reliant on China, its somewhat reluctant sponsor.

In the South, Rhee was forced out of office in 1960 and there followed a series of right-wing military dictatorships. Public discontent eventually led to the establishment of a modern democracy in 1987. During the same period South Korea built one of the most successful economies in Asia. In 1998, South Korea's Kim Dae-jung initiated a 'sunshine policy', aimed at reconciliation. This culminated in a summit in June 2000, held in Pyongyang. Jong-un's stance since 2011 has undone most of this good work. Today, South Koreans dream less of reunification and worry more about the collapse of the North – or worse.

Modern Seoul (Image by Leeyan Kym N. Fontano)

Reasons to Remember

The Korean War reset the world's political geometry and ushered in the Cold War. Any remaining naivety concerning the grand coalition which had defeated Germany and Japan was washed away. It was clear now that the world was divided into two opposed blocs, but was also one in which nationalism remained a powerful component.

It presented an ugly template for how limited, highly political wars might be fought as a substitute for nuclear armageddon. In such cases, the debate between political and military control of conflict was definitively resolved. For the USA, it flagged up many lessons which were promptly forgotten during the Vietnam quagmire.

From the early 1960s, the USA was to find itself sucked in to another Asian war. In Vietnam it propped up a corrupt anti-Communist regime in the south of a divided country. Misjudgements about the capabilities of an Asian peasant army were to recur. It was a limited war, requiring restraint and close political control. The problems of an over-reliance on firepower were exposed. The importance of nationalism versus ideology was misunderstood. Eventually, the Americans elected a President who, like Eisenhower in 1952, was committed to shutting down the war as soon as possible. In many ways, Vietnam was an unlucky rerun of the Korean experience.

The Korean War also helped to propel Japan back into the economic premier league. As the war started, the heavy US investment which had characterized its engagement since 1945 had come to an abrupt end. A new economic policy of radical deflation, led by Joseph Dodge, had precipitated a slowdown. The sudden arrival of thousands of UN troops, using Japan as a safe staging post and a resort for those on leave from the front, was to rescue the situation. Japan became the obvious choice for the mass purchase of supplies, boosting Japanese manufacturing. Troops spent their US dollars in the Japanese economy. By 1953, US military purchases alone were accounting for 7 per cent of Japanese gross national product. The post-Second World War military occupation had ended in 1952 and the now sovereign Japanese government introduced its own policies to facilitate export-led growth. This would soon average 9 per cent per year.

The Korean War provided important impetus to the development of NATO. Established in 1949, for its first few years NATO would remain an essentially political organization. The war in Asia was to change that, with the realization that another large war in Europe was entirely possible. On the back of this, it was not until the Lisbon Conference in 1952 that NATO began to plan seriously in terms of troop numbers and joint exercises. SEATO (the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, established in 1954) had its genesis in the same manner.

During an all too brief period, the Korean War seemed to promise a workable system for collective security, delivered through the United Nations. Arguably that model was resurrected for the Gulf War of 1990 but, sadly, aggression has more often gone unchecked. That should not cheapen the achievement of the coalition which was built in the summer of 1950. For all its flaws, it did secure South Korea against an unprovoked attack.

For these reasons and more, 'The Forgotten War' is well worth remembering.

Appendix 1: Key Players

Edward Almond (12 December 1892–11 June 1979)

Edward Almond was one of the more controversial of America's twentieth-century generals. A Virginian by birth, Almond was to attend that state's prestigious Virginia Military Institute before joining the US Army as an infantry officer and serving in the 4th Division on the Western Front in 1918. Despite his brief period on the frontline he saw extensive action, commanding a machine gun battalion.

Almond had reached the rank of brevet Colonel by the time of the Japanese attack on the USA in December 1941. Between the wars, after a spell teaching at a military institute in Alabama and a brief tour of duty in the Philippines, he took up a series of staff roles. He worked in intelligence with the General Staff in Washington and then with the VI Corps in Rhode Island.

During the Second World War he was promoted to Brigadier General and spent the first half of the war training his command – the all black 92nd Infantry Division. Almond led the division in the Italian campaign from 1944 until the defeat of Germany. The conduct of his unit – the last all black division in a previously segregated army – has been subject to controversy ever since. Some have attributed its poor performance to arrogance and racism on Almond's part, while others have cited other factors such as neglect from the high command. He is alleged to have advised the Army against using black soldiers in combat roles as a result of this experience.

Almond also suffered personal tragedy during the war: both his son and son-in-law were killed in action.

After the war he spent a year back in the USA, before transferring to MacArthur's Far East Command in Tokyo. There he was promoted to the rank of Major General and entered MacArthur's inner circle, serving as Chief of Staff. Intimately involved in the planning for the Inchon invasion, he was rewarded with the command of the X Corps, which MacArthur had tasked with the assault. When the X Corps was later switched to the east of the country, Almond's troops fared markedly better than their colleagues in Walker's 8th Army during the surprise Chinese attack at the close of 1950. Yet he argued repeatedly with his subordinate, General O. P. Smith, whose Marine division did most of the tough fighting. He continued in command until July 1951, by which time the war had stagnated.

Back in the USA again, Almond spent the remainder of his military career leading the Army War College in Pennsylvania. He retired from army service in 1953, but kept up his interest in military affairs by serving on the board of his old college, the Virginia Military Institute. He died in 1979 and is buried at Arlington cemetery, Virginia.

Dwight D. Eisenhower (14 October 1890–28 March 1969)

Although born in Texas, Dwight D. Eisenhower considered himself a Kansan, which is where the family moved when he was two years old. His father was an engineer; his mother a devout Christian and pacifist. 'Ike' was the third of seven boys. Passionate about military history, Ike qualified for West Point, where he spent three years mostly distinguished by his sporting prowess. He married Mamie Doud in 1916 and they had two sons, one of whom died in infancy.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1959 (Image by the White House)

Initially an infantry officer, Eisenhower spent most of the First World War training tank crews, though he never saw action himself. This remained an embarrassment and a regret for him – and was to expose him to criticism later in his life. After the war Eisenhower continued to work in the tank arm, befriending George Patton and sharing his views on the importance of mobility. He worked for generals Conner and MacArthur, establishing a reputation for a creative mind and administrative flair. Fox Conner put him forward for command college in 1925. He then commanded a battalion until 1927.

From 1933 he worked with General Douglas MacArthur, moving with him to the Philippines in 1935, a position he held until 1939. More senior staff work ensued and in 1941 he was made Brigadier General. When the USA entered the Second World War Eisenhower worked in the War Plans Office, which he eventually headed. Despite his lack of frontline experience he was made US Theater Commander in Europe in June 1942. As such, he had overall command of the Torch landings in North Africa in November, and thereafter the Anglo-American armies which invaded Italy. In December 1943 he became Supreme Allied Commander for Europe – a role in which his deft political skills were more important than his military ones. Somehow he managed to operate successfully between such egos as Churchill, de Gaulle, Patton and Montgomery. He emerged from the war a full five-star General, highly regarded by all sides.

He served briefly as Governor of the US Zone in Germany, before returning to the USA and becoming Army Chief of Staff. Refusing to become involved in the 1948 presidential election, Eisenhower instead took on the post of President of Columbia University. He also became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, in 1950, the Supreme Commander of NATO.

After a great deal of persuasion and almost with reluctance, Eisenhower began campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in 1952. He went on to win the presidency with ease. Within seven months of taking office, using a combination of diplomacy and pressure, his administration had secured the armistice which ended the Korean War. As president, Eisenhower described himself as an 'active conservative'. He continued with many of Truman's welfare programmes, introduced the US interstate highway system, and in foreign affairs ushered in a new robust era. It was under his tenure that the 'domino theory' gained currency and the USA built up both a large nuclear arsenal and the CIA. He sent the first US troops to South Vietnam and, in 1956, stopped the Anglo-French invasion of Suez. Although he had a serious heart attack in 1955, he fought and won a second term the following year.

Eisenhower retired from public office in 1961, John Kennedy having beaten his chosen successor to the presidency – Richard Nixon. Thereafter he lived quietly on a farm on the Gettysburg battlefield, since bequeathed to the nation. He took up oil painting and, for the most part, avoided public discourse. Dwight D. Eisenhower died of a heart attack in 1969. He was buried in his home state – Kansas.

Douglas MacArthur (26 January 1880–5 April 1964)

Born on an army base in Arkansas, Douglas MacArthur came from a proud military lineage. His father had been a Union general in the American Civil War and MacArthur sought to follow in his footsteps. Highly gifted academically, he qualified for West Point in 1899. Despite the bullying culture he found there, MacArthur worked hard and scored 98 per cent when he passed out, serving as First Captain during his final year.

He took up a position in the prestigious engineering corps and his first assignment was to the Philippines, then a US colony, in 1903. This was followed by an extensive tour of Asia accompanying his father, who remained a senior army officer and had pulled strings to secure his son's appointment as his secretary. They returned in 1906, MacArthur having become fascinated by the continent and convinced of its importance for US foreign policy.

From 1912 until America joined the First World War in 1917, MacArthur worked in Washington, first with the Chief of Staff and then in establishing the army's Bureau of Information. It was during this period that his remarkable administrative talents began to be noticed. However, the arrival of war persuaded him that he should attempt to obtain a posting to France. The 42nd 'Rainbow Division' – a mixed unit composed of National Guard regiments from across the USA – was his idea. He, therefore, secured a position as its Chief of Staff. Despite the staff role, MacArthur served with distinction and bravery throughout his time in the trenches. He was decorated by both America and France.

After the war he was appointed Superintendent of West Point, where he was able to introduce reforms to tackle some of the bad practice he had experienced for himself. In 1922 he married and was transferred to the Philippines. Promoted to Major General in 1925, he commanded IV and then III Corps. Depressed after separating from his wife in 1927 (they divorced in 1929), he threw himself into the leadership of the 1928 US Olympic Committee.

After another spell in the Philippines, MacArthur was offered the army's top job – Chief of Staff – in 1930. It was a job his father had coveted before him. His tenure was a difficult one, as he sought to protect the army during times of austerity. His emphasis on retaining a strong officer cadre in a much reduced army has been credited with America's ability to effectively rearm prior to the Second World War.

In 1935, having many friends among the Philippine elite, he was invited to take on the job of building her armed forces in preparation for independence. He met his second wife on the trip over and they

married in 1937. He immersed himself in his new task, yet resources remained scarce. It was not until July 1941, when he was reappointed to the US Army as Lieutenant General, that matters began to improve.

Despite this, the Japanese soon ejected MacArthur's army from the Philippines, and he made his famous promise to 'return'. He did so after the Southwest Pacific island hopping campaign of 1942–5, with the imaginative leadership of a mixed Australian and US force.

MacArthur, back in the Philippines in 1945 (Image by the Naval Historical Centre)

After the Japanese surrender, MacArthur was appointed Supreme Commander in Japan. Over the next five years he was to demonstrate huge administrative and diplomatic skill in rebuilding Japan. The Korean War, however, was to prove his nemesis. Appointed to UN command largely because he was the senior American on the spot, MacArthur's Inchon gambit was to be his last major success.

Dismissed in April 1951 for repeated insubordination, MacArthur attempted to run for the presidency in 1952. After that failure he largely passed from public life, living in the Waldorf Hotel, New York. MacArthur died in 1964. He received a full state funeral, attended by an estimated 150,000 people.

Kim Il Sung (15 April 1912–8 July 1994)

North Korean propaganda poster of Kim Il Sung, released after his death in 1994 (Image by Gilad Rom)

Much of Kim Il Sung's life remains wrapped in mystery and regime propaganda. As such, some of his biographical details are 'best guesses'. It seems clear that he was born in a mountainous region to the north of Pyongyang, the eldest of three brothers. His parents may have been involved in missionary work and there is evidence that his mother was active in the anti-Japanese opposition. The family moved to Manchuria when Kim was young; much of his own early activity would, therefore, be there and in China.

Kim became a Communist at a young age. He may even have been arrested by the Japanese while still a boy. It is thought that he joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1931 and that by 1935 he was fighting as a guerilla against the Japanese, mainly in Manchuria. He enjoyed some success in these efforts, but had to flee to Russia during the Second World War. Once there he studied and eventually joined the Russian Army, fighting in the 1945 Manchurian campaign against Japan.

By September of that year he was back in his native Korea, as the favoured candidate to head the pro-Soviet regime being established north of the 38th Parallel. There are those who claim that this Kim was an impostor, following the death of the guerilla leader in Russia; such speculation is generally regarded as implausible. On the 9 September 1948 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, with Kim at its head, was proclaimed. Its constitution claimed sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula. Kim ruled through the Workers' Party of Korea, instigating land reform and the beginnings of a Soviet-style state.

It is difficult to gauge his precise role in the decision chain that led to the North's invasion of the South in 1950. The balance of opinion is that this was his project, encouraged and facilitated by Russia and China to one degree or another. Once the war had begun, however, Kim's role in it was to swiftly diminish. He was forced into exile in China by the UN advance in late 1950 and Chinese intervention placed him firmly in the back seat. They were now, after all, providing most of the manpower. Kim is said to have resented this and to have wearied of the war by the time the armistice was signed in mid-1953.

Following the war, Kim initially remained friendly with both Russia and China, beginning to edge away from the former as Mao Zedong's government did so. Internally his regime was absolutely ruthless from the outset, murdering thousands on the vaguest suspicion of opposition. Similarly, whenever his own personal rule was questioned within the party, he was quick and ruthless.

His style also assumed that of the personality cult with which North Korea is still associated. The era of the 'Great Leader' had started. It was not long before pictures and statues were to be seen throughout the country. At the same time he subsumed economic expansion for military expenditure, leading to a near total dependence on Russia and China for aid.

The Cultural Revolution was to lead to a split with China and something of a rapprochement with Russia and Eastern Europe. In 1972 Kim changed the constitution and appointed himself President. By 1980, secure in the support of the army, he had appointed his son (Kim Jong-il) as his successor; it was as if a monarchy was emerging.

The collapse of the USSR meant that North Korea became almost completely isolated. Kim's inept economic and particularly agricultural policies now led to widespread famine. Yet he retained his grip on power. In 1994 he initiated a nuclear programme, halted following the personal intervention of Jimmy Carter. Kim was by now an elderly and sick man. He died of a heart attack later that year. True to form, the regime arranged a massive funeral; the body still lies in an ostentatious mausoleum in Pyongyang. Kim's grandson continues the dynastic line.

Mao Zedong (26 December 1893–9 September 1976)

The future Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party was the son of a landowner in Hunan, central China. Their relationship, and indeed Mao's youth, was tempestuous. Rejecting an arranged childhood marriage, Mao was an avid reader and political thinker from an early age. From the time he went to the regional capital (Changsha) to continue his studies he became involved in radical politics. Initially he was attracted to Sun Yat-sen's ideas, which were essentially Western-democratic in tone. In 1911–12 he was involved on the fringes of the Xinhai revolution, serving in the rebel army for a time.

As a young man he tried and dropped out of a number of careers and university courses. Ultimately he was to train as a teacher, graduating in 1919. By then his father had disowned him and he was becoming interested in socialism. He spent two years in Beijing, working at the university library and gravitating towards communism and the Russian revolutionaries. Back in Changsha he taught history in between organizing a radical student movement and writing on politics. In 1920 he organized local students in support of a powerful faction of the KMT (Kuomintang), a manoeuvre which was to secure him a well-paid position as a headmaster. He married Yang Kaihui the same year.

In 1921 he attended the first congress of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai, becoming the representative for Hunan. During the following five years he emerged as an influential figure in the party, enthusiastically working alongside the KMT under Yat-sen.

By 1927, Chiang Kai-shek had succeeded Yat-sen as head of the KMT; one of his early actions had been to eject Communists from the KMT, which initiated a civil war. Mao was given command of the 'Red Army' – the armed wing of the party. Early military failure led to reduced influence for Mao, but by 1930 he had created a mini-Communist state based on Jiangxi in southern China. These were violent times – Mao did not hesitate to execute thousands of his enemies; his own wife was killed by the KMT and he then married He Zizhen, with whom he had six children. In 1934 Mao's forces broke out of the encircling KMT and began the 'Long March' – 6,000 miles to Shaanxi in northern China. The march was to take a year. Only 8,000 of the 100,000 who began it survived, but it served to establish Mao as leader of the

movement. During the same period he divorced and then married Jiang Qing – who would become known to the world as ‘Madame Mao’.

Mao with wife number four, ‘Madame Mao’, in 1947

There followed another uneasy alliance with the KMT, while the Japanese were finally ejected from China in 1945. Mao then led the Red Army in a war of extermination against Chiang’s forces. At the Communist siege of Changchun alone, it is estimated that 160,000 civilians died. The People’s Republic of China was declared on 1 October 1949, with Mao as Party Chairman.

Mao was instrumental in the decision to intervene in the Korean War, but towards the end of his life took a more moderate stance in foreign affairs, meeting President Nixon in 1972. Meanwhile, he had broken with Moscow after the Korean War. Domestically, his policies included the ‘Great Leap Forward’ of 1958 and the ‘Cultural Revolution’ in 1966. The former was an attempt to transform the Chinese economy overnight, which led to famine. The latter was an effort to ‘purge’ so-called opposition and thereby protect Mao’s personal position. Both cost millions of lives.

Mao died of heart disease and associated complications in 1976. China turned the corner with the first of its more liberal reformers – Deng Xiaoping – emerging as the new national leader.

Syngman Rhee (26 March 1875–19 July 1965)

An official photograph of Rhee, taken shortly after the war.

Syngman Rhee, the uncompromising leader of South Korea during the war, was in fact born in the North. His family were of modest means and economic hardship forced their relocation to Seoul in 1877, when Rhee was only two. He had four siblings and, following an early Confucian upbringing, was primarily educated by Christian missionaries. Exactly when Rhee became a Christian is unclear, though he was later to claim it was when he was in prison as a young man.

Certainly he was forthright in his opinions. In 1896 he was among a group of radical young men who formed the 'Independence Club' – a nationalist organization critical of the role of Japan in Korea's affairs. Two years later he was arrested and imprisoned for sedition. He spent six years incarcerated, during which he wrote copiously. When a more liberal government took power in 1904 he was released and fled in exile to the USA.

Once there he continued his studies in earnest, focusing on history and politics and securing a PhD from Princeton. By now a prominent Korean Nationalist, his advice was sought by Theodore Roosevelt's negotiating team on the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the Russio-Japanese War. Yet he was unable to secure anything like Korean independence on the back of this.

In 1910 he returned to Korea for just over a year, in a management role with the YMCA. It quickly became clear that the Japanese authorities would not tolerate his political activism and so he again went into exile. This time he moved to Hawaii, which would be his base for thirty years.

In 1919 he was elected in absentia as Head of the Korean Provisional Government. In fact, this was nothing more than a pressure group, largely based in China. Although he moved to Shanghai for a few years in 1920, his relations with others in the group waned. He was ousted in 1925 – accused of abuse of power – and he returned to Hawaii.

Back in the USA he continued to play a prominent part in the ex-patriate Korean community, both in Washington and Hawaii. In 1934 he married an Austrian woman, Franziska Donner. Reputedly Rhee had also been briefly married during his youth but little is known of this earlier relationship. Donner was to become a loyal companion for the rest of his life, and a prominent figure in Korea in her own right.

After the Second World War, Rhee saw his chance to have a serious impact on Korea's future. He returned to the peninsula and set up his own political party in the American-occupied South. Implacably opposed to communism, Rhee lobbied hard for the unification of Korea under a Western system. During this period he was often at odds with the American administration in Korea, stirring up strikes and demonstrations. He was not averse to strong-arm tactics and this ruthlessness largely secured his position as the leading candidate during the presidential election in the South in 1950.

Following his elevation to the presidency, Rhee did not hesitate to suppress any opposition he found. With the attack by the North later that year matters only worsened, and the elections which were held in the South during 1952 were little more than a sham. By now his American allies were thoroughly disenchanted with him, and he came close to sabotaging the final stages of the armistice talks with China and North Korea. Rhee was never reconciled to the uneasy settlement that was achieved in July 1953.

South Korea emerged from the war a crippled and backward economy, almost totally reliant on US aid. Rhee, now 78 years old, lacked any political vision beyond his anti-communism. Notwithstanding this he sought and won the presidency for a third time in 1956, though not entirely on his own terms. In the separate vice-presidential election his main rival Chang Myon won comfortably, at the expense of Rhee's candidate.

The end came in 1960. Attempting to circumvent the constitution and seek a fourth term, Rhee claimed over 90 per cent support in another disputed election. The riots that followed led to a coup and his exile from Korea – facilitated by the CIA. He went back to Hawaii, where he died of a stroke five years later.

Rhee's body was returned and interred in South Korea. Franziska also moved back to Seoul, where she lived until her death in 1992.

Matthew Ridgway (3 March 1895–26 July 1993)

Hailing from a military family, Matthew Ridgway spent his entire childhood away at school or on army bases. It was little surprise that he applied for West Point on completing his schooling, gaining entry at the second attempt. He went on to teach Spanish there and so missed active service during the First World War.

The 1920s saw Ridgway in a series of junior infantry commands spanning most of those areas where the USA had an interest. Thus he served in the Philippines, China and Nicaragua, as well as in mainland USA. His recognition and rise to senior rank, however, was in a staff capacity. Throughout the 1930s, he undertook a number of important administrative roles, culminating in a senior position in the crucial War Plans Division. It was during this period that his talents came to the notice of General George Marshall, who pushed Ridgway forward.

Consequently Ridgway was promoted to Brigadier General in January 1942 and by June he was promoted again and given an airborne division to train. This was the 82nd, which would become one of the army's most elite formations. Ridgway led his paratroopers in tough fighting in Sicily and Normandy,

jumping with them into battle. In September 1944 he was given command of the entire US Paratroop Corps, just in time for the disastrous Allied airborne assault at Arnheim. Brushing off defeat, his troops were to gain fame during the Battle of the Bulge and would be at the vanguard of the Allied advance into Germany.

After the war Ridgway held theatre-level commands in the Philippines, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean before his appointment to command the 8th Army in Korea. Taking over after General Walker's death, Ridgway restored the morale and capability of the UN forces, eventually stabilizing the situation and gaining the upper hand over the Chinese.

MacArthur's dismissal in April 1951 saw Ridgway promoted to full General and commander of all UN forces in Korea. Although Korea may have represented the epitome of Ridgway's combat career, he went on to serve as Army Chief of Staff under President Eisenhower. This was a difficult period, as Ridgway opposed Eisenhower's build-up of the navy and air force at the expense of the army.

He retired from public service in 1955 but built a successful second career in corporate management, serving at board level in several large companies. He remained interested in military matters, advising President Johnson against deeper involvement in Vietnam.

Matthew Ridgway was married three times and lived to the age of 98. One of America's most highly regarded generals, he is buried in Arlington, Virginia.

Harry S. Truman (8 May 1884–26 December 1972)

From Missouri farming stock, Harry S. Truman was at one time the least popular President on record, yet is now regarded as one of the twentieth century's more successful leaders. Truman never went to university, the last US President not to have done so. Nonetheless he was a widely read and largely self-taught man, modest in his demeanour and habits.

After a series of menial jobs and work on his father's farm, Truman went to the Western Front in the First World War as a member of the Missouri National Guard. He had cheated his way through the sight test, so anxious was he to go. The war brought out the leader in Truman, who was a popular and successful artillery officer.

In 1919 he married Bess Wallace, also from Missouri. Various business ventures came to nothing and the Trumans fell into debt. It was only through the sponsorship of a local contact that Truman found his niche in public office. Tom Pendergast, a wealthy 'fixer' for the Democratic Party, was to secure Truman's nomination for minor elected roles and, in 1934, as a senator for the state. By this time he had become a keen advocate of Roosevelt's New Deal, befriending the President's close advisor Harry Hopkins.

As a senator Truman kept a low profile until given the chairmanship of a committee of inquiry into military procurement. The 'Truman Committee' was to impress Roosevelt and help to propel Truman upwards. By the time of the 1944 presidential election Roosevelt and his inner circle were aware that he might not live to see out his term. Truman had shown integrity, loyalty and skill; importantly, he bridged the left and the right within the party. Accordingly, Roosevelt arranged to have him on the ticket as his Vice President.

Only eighty-two days after Roosevelt's inauguration he died of a brain haemorrhage. A shocked Truman shrewdly decided to retain Roosevelt's entire cabinet. The Second World War had yet to be won and he had not been fully immersed in presidential business. Within months of taking office, he was to represent the USA at the Potsdam Conference and authorize the atomic bombing of Japan.

President Harry S. Truman (Image by Truman Library – Frank Gatteri, United States Army Signal Corps)

Truman was to find his metier in foreign policy, in which he enjoyed support across Congress. Firm but careful leadership during the Berlin crisis, the independence of Israel and the outbreak of the Korean War was to win him widespread respect. He initiated the 'Truman Doctrine', designed to contain the USSR, as well as the vitally important Marshall Plan. He was an internationalist, instrumental in the early development of the United Nations.

At home, he faced stronger opposition. Following his re-election in 1948 his radical healthcare plans were effectively stopped by his own party. He struggled with inflation and economic difficulties, strikes and demonstrations. Notwithstanding this, Truman set in train the civil rights' agenda and he desegregated the US armed forces.

The dismissal of MacArthur saw Truman's approval ratings plummet. On the back of this he was defeated in the first Primary for the 1952 election and withdrew at that stage. Unlike many before him and since, Truman absolutely refused to take company directorships or product endorsements after he left office. He felt such conduct to be improper. As a result, living modestly with his wife in Missouri, he often faced economic hardship. Truman died in December 1972. At his own request, he was buried quietly in a service limited to friends and family.

Appendix 2: Timeline of the Korean War

1219	First Mongol invasion of Korea.
1392	Joseon dynasty established in Korea.
1904	Russio-Japanese War.
1905	Treaty of Portsmouth; Japanese dominance of Korea recognized.
1910	Japan annexes Korea; collapse of Joseon dynasty.
1945	US and Russian zones in Korea established, divided by the 38th Parallel.
1948	Rhee elected first President of the South. Kim appointed in the North.

1950

12 January	Dean Acheson speech suggests Korea is not vital to US interests.
25 June	North Korea invades the South; the UN Security Council calls for North Korean forces to withdraw (Resolution 82).
27 June	The UN Security Council calls on member states to defend South Korea (Resolution 83). US forces are ordered to intervene.
29 June	Seoul falls to the North Korean Army. Britain promises forces.
1 July	First US ground troops arrive in South Korea.
5 July	Battle of Osan: US 'Task Force Smith' defeated.
7 July	MacArthur appointed UN Commander.
1 August	Russia ends UN Security Council boycott.
23 August	MacArthur persuades colleagues to support Inchon invasion at Tokyo meeting.
31 August	Final North Korean assault on Pusan perimeter.
15 September	UN amphibious invasion at Inchon.
16 September	UN 8th Army breaks out from Pusan.
27 September	UN forces recapture Seoul.
1 October	South Korean troops cross 38th Parallel.
7 October	US troops cross 38th Parallel.
8 October	Mao orders Chinese intervention in Korea.
15 October	Truman and MacArthur meet on Wake island.
19 October	UN captures Pyongyang.
25 October	First clashes with Chinese troops; First Phase Chinese offensive.
27 October	UN 8th Army advance stopped by Chinese forces.
29 October	UN X Corps advance stopped by Chinese forces.
1 November	Chinese aircraft engage US Air Force.
24 November	UN 'Home by Christmas' offensive; Second Phase Chinese offensive.
5 December	Pyongyang recaptured by Communist forces.

11 December	X Corps evacuates Hungnam by sea.
12 December	Security Council meets Chinese Communist delegation.
22 December	China rejects UN ceasefire proposal.
23 December	US General Walker killed in road accident.
25 December	Chinese troops move south of 38th Parallel.
27 December	General Ridgway takes command of US 8th Army.
29 December	Truman warns MacArthur that the war must be contained.

1951

1 January	Third Phase Chinese offensive.
4 January	Communists capture Seoul for the second time.
17 January	China rejects second ceasefire proposal.
15 February	Fourth Phase Chinese offensive.
21 February	UN counter-offensive begins. Operation ‘Killer’.
15 March	UN retakes Seoul.
3 April	UN crosses 38th Parallel for the second time.
5 April	Incriminating letter from MacArthur read out in House of Representatives.
11 April	MacArthur dismissed; Ridgway appointed as his successor.
22 April	Fifth Phase Chinese spring offensive.
23 June	Russia calls for a ceasefire.
10 July	Armistice negotiations begin at Kaesong.
23 August	Communists walk out of peace talks.
25 October	Peace talks resume at Panmunjom.
13 November	USA issues thirty-day deadline for talks.

1952

2 May	UN prisoner proposal rejected.
12 May	Ridgway replaced by Mark Clark.
5 August	Rhee re-elected in rigged South Korean election.
8 October	Talks break down completely on prisoner question.
4 November	Eisenhower wins US presidential election.

1953

20 January	Eisenhower takes office as US President.
11 February	General Taylor takes over 8th Army from Van Fleet.
20 April	Exchange of sick prisoners.
26 April	Talks resume.
8 June	Agreement reached concerning prisoners.
18 June	Rhee releases 25,000 Chinese and North Korean prisoners who do not wish to return to Communist countries.

27 July	Armistice signed; ceasefire takes effect at 10pm.

Appendix 3: The 1950 UN Coalition

The following nations sent combat forces to Korea in support of UN Security Council Resolution 83:

Australia
Belgium
Canada
Colombia
Cuba
Ethiopia
France
Greece
Luxembourg
Netherlands
New Zealand
Philippines
South Africa
Thailand
Turkey
United Kingdom
United States

Several other offers of military support were ‘deferred’ on the grounds of practicality. Nationalist China’s offer was declined. Other countries provided transport, medical and other non-military support.

Appendix 4: Military Organization

The following is a list of the conventional military hierarchy, as used in the text, with approximate troop numbers. Terms and numbers vary considerably from one army to another.

Squad/section	about 10 troops
Platoon	30
Company	100
Battalion	300
Regiment	1,000
Brigade	3,000
Division	10,000
Corps	30,000
Army	30,000+

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