New Light on a “Forgotten War”: The Diplomacy of the Korean Conflict

The Korean War lasted for three years, leaving approximately 3,000,000 Koreans dead, wounded, or missing; 150,000 Chinese and 33,000 Americans dead; a further 220,000 Chinese and 92,000 Americans wounded; and the United States with unprecedented permanent Asian commitments (1). Yet historians have termed it the “Unknown War” and the “Forgotten War” (2). Korea resonates far less in popular memory than either of the two conflicts which bracket it, the much broader Second World War, with its triumphant ending, and the lengthy and still bitterly debated Vietnam War.

Until the 1990s, historiography on the Cold War relied almost entirely on Western documentary sources which, though sometimes incomplete even today, provide a relatively comprehensive picture of the Western side of the story. In recent years, materials from newly opened archives in the former Soviet bloc and to some degree from China have begun to illuminate several issues of the war that were hotly argued for decades and until now have remained obscure (3). For the first time one can speak with some confidence on the thinking, objectives, and outlook of Cold War Communist leaders.

Historiographical disputes over the Korean War have centered upon whether the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) deliberately manipulated the outbreak of war with the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) in order to accomplish other objectives; the degree of Soviet and Communist Chinese foreknowledge of and involvement in DPRK plans for war; why United States leaders chose to enter the war and then to cross the 38th parallel; the reasons for Chinese intervention in late 1950, and whether this might have been avoided; whether the Korean War sabotaged a potential rapprochement between the United States and the new People’s Republic of China (PRC); and the war’s longer-term implications for the major powers involved.

The Second World War and the developing Cold War combined to produce the division of Korea. In 1945 Soviet troops, in accordance with wartime Allied agreements, liberated the country north of the 38th parallel from Japanese control, while United States forces took over the territory to the south. Initially, these agreements envisaged a united Korea but, as with Germany, events on the ground militated against its realization. Because of burgeoning Cold War hostility dividing the Soviet Union and the Western allies, by late 1945 relations between Korea’s two occupation forces were already antagonistic, and prospects of Korean unification quickly became remote.

Historians generally agree that neither occupying power nor its associated Korean leader would have accepted a settlement that denied their side predominance in a united Korea. Each military occupation government encouraged those political forces it found most ideologically compatible. In the North, the Soviets backed Kim Il Sung, a young guerrilla fighter who had fought with Chinese Communist forces against the Japanese, while in the South, the Americans endorsed Syngman Rhee, an elderly, obstinate, and decidedly authoritarian Korean aristocrat and independence advocate who had spent decades in exile.

In 1948 the United Nations (U.N.) approved the establishment of the Republic of Korea in the South, held elections in which Rhee
won an overwhelming majority as president, and promptly recognized his government. In September 1948, with strong Soviet encouragement, Kim refused U.N.-sponsored elections and proclaimed the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, a Soviet ally and client which the United Nations declined to recognize. Both Korean governments shared at least one objective: the elimination of their rival and their country’s eventual reunification under their own control (4).

The question of which state was responsible for beginning the Korean War has given rise to much historiographical and political debate. For many years the Chinese argued that South Korea, in collaboration with the United States, invaded the North in June 1950, and that North Korean, Chinese, and Soviet policy was entirely reactive. In 1991 Bruce Cumings suggested that responsibility for the war remained unclear, that South Korea was as eager as the North to reunify the country, and that South Korean troops probably initiated the actual hostilities (5). A still more conspiratorial theory suggested that the United States deliberately provoked the Korean War in order to win congressional and public support for the enormous three- to four-fold increases in American defense spending envisaged in the 1950 policy planning staff paper NSC-68. According to this theory, U.S. officials lured North Korea and the Soviet Union into a war by publicly stating that they considered South Korea extraneous to United States security interests in Asia. Foremost among the evidence cited to support this thesis was a 12 January 1950 speech to the National Press Club in which U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson declared that neither Korea nor Taiwan fell within the Asian “defensive perimeter” of vital strategic interests that the United States would defend (6).

The U.S. government had launched a major reassessment of its defense policies, supposedly intended to match the country’s vast and growing post-Second World War military commitments to its limited capabilities. Although Acheson suggested these countries could rely upon the United Nations to defend them, apparently many among the wider audience, including leaders of the Communist states, simply assumed that the United States had completely abandoned Taiwan and South Korea (7).

On the Communist side, it appears that Kim II Sung, whose forces in 1950 enjoyed substantial military superiority over those of the South, initiated the invasion in the hope that he could unify Korea (8). It is also clear that the Soviet Union knew well in advance Kim’s intentions, which he advocated enthusiastically from spring 1949. In late January 1950, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin finally endorsed Kim’s plans and promised him military and economic aid essential to the enterprise’s success, but he refused to commit Soviet troops. In all likelihood, Communist China’s supreme leader Mao Zedong had some foreknowledge of Kim’s intentions, though Kim did not then seek his assistance. Apparently all three Communist leaders considered the United States unlikely to intervene to defend South Korea, interpreting Acheson’s speech as confirmation that the United States would not do so (9).

This miscalculation by the Communist leaders need not imply that the United States deliberately entrapped them into opening hostilities. Most historians now agree that, although U.S. intervention in the Korean War undoubtedly brought massive long-term enhancements of both American defense spending and military commitments around the world, U.S. officials failed to anticipate the war’s outbreak and cannot be held guilty of manipulating their opponents into opening hostilities. Moreover, until the September 1950 Inchon landing there was a real likelihood that North Korean forces might emerge victorious, driving United States forces from Korea and annexing all of South Korea’s territory. It was highly improbable that American or South Korean leaders would have risked so much deliberately. It seems clear that the outbreak of war surprised both the United States and South Korea; the South Koreans only possessed sufficient resources to wage a defensive war for fifteen days (10).

The question then remains: why, given American officials’ distinct distaste for the South Korean government and their previous dismissal of its strategic significance, did they almost immediately decide to intervene to restore the status quo and energetically persuade the United Nations to endorse this stance? Certainly, broader Cold War preoccupations intersected with a fluid Asian situation to dissuade U.S. officials from acquiescence in any North Korean takeover. They feared that inaction would lead other United States allies to doubt American resolve to fulfill its commitments to them, while Communist states would learn that, faced with a hostile army, the United States would not back its pledges with military force. U.S. leaders essentially perceived the Korean conflict as a test of American credibility and their commitment to the strategy of “containing” Communism, which by 1950 had become an entrenched dogma of American foreign relations (11).

Moreover, virtually all American policy makers of this period were strongly influenced by the lessons of the 1930s. In their view, “appeasement” of dictators simply encouraged them to escalate their demands, whereas firm initial resistance to such aggression would lead them to yield and withdraw. Perceiving Stalin as a second Hitler and Kim merely as his puppet, American officials believed there was no alternative to intervention in Korea (12).

In the early 1980s several American scholars suggested that the Korean War marked a “lost chance in China,” that without the military confrontation between Communist Chinese and U.S. troops and the revitalized American commitment to Taiwan that the war precipitated, there existed a strong possibility of a rapprochement between the new PRC and the United States (13). Moreover, in late 1949 and early 1950, Acheson, influenced by the emergence in 1948 of Yugoslavia’s independence Titoist Communist regime, believed in the potential of driving a “wedge” between the Soviet Union and mainland China (14).

Subsequent scholarship, however, suggests that the prospects for such a Sino-American understanding ranged from slim to nonexistent. Several historians, particularly Chinese, have noted the centrality of Communist ideology and revolutionary fervor in contemporary Chinese leaders’ international political outlook, impelling them to distrust the United States and favor the Soviet Union. U.S. opposition to the emergence of a Communist state on the Chinese
mainland, and American incomprehension of the deep resentment that a century of Western exploitation and humiliation had generated in China’s new leaders, compounded the problem (15).

This is not to deny that China’s intervention in Korea in late 1950, which precipitated direct combat between Chinese and American troops, intensified and hardened existing deep-seated Sino-American antagonisms. Two decisions contributed to this situation: that of the United States in September 1950 to permit U.N. forces to cross the 38th parallel, and that of China to intervene in Korea in October 1950.

U.S. officials originally restricted their war aims to the restoration of the “status quo,” namely, the expulsion of North Korean forces from the South and the recovery of all former southern territory. Following the spectacular Inchon landing and recapture of Seoul, Washington and the United Nations Command were tempted to expand their aims to include the North’s conquest, the overthrow of its government, and Korea’s reunification under a southern-dominated (and presumably Western-oriented) regime. The momentum of victory was difficult to resist, generating a sense of “hubris” (16).

In September and October 1950 American officials, therefore, ignored successive Chinese warnings that, should U.N. forces cross the 38th parallel, Chinese forces would intervene. Allen Whiting’s classic work China Crosses the Yalu took these messages at face value. Historians Jian Chen and Shu Guang Zhang believe that by early October the decision was already made. However, William Stueck argues that immediately before Chinese intervention the situation remained fluid, and a decision to permit only South Korean forces to move north of the parallel might well have persuaded the PRC to reverse its decision to join the conflict (17). Stueck contends that, even at this late date, Mao was still uncertain whether to intervene. The 1993 work Uncertain Partners suggests that in autumn 1950 Stalin, eager to prevent the extension of Western power to Russia’s land border with Korea, pressed a somewhat reluctant Mao to enter the Korean War (18).

Historians have noted the extent to which Mao dominated Chinese decision-making on Korea (19). Several have posited that his thinking was shaped by “military romanticism,” a sense that war, conflict, and battle were the measure and proving ground for nations. Relations between China and North Korea were close, and from the war’s beginning Mao believed Chinese intervention might be necessary—though he hoped the North Korean forces would triumph completely before any outside power could intervene (20).

Chinese antagonism toward the United States further intensified in late June 1950, when President Harry S. Truman sent the U.S. 7th Fleet to patrol the Taiwan Strait, thereby precluding a mainland takeover of the island. Then, when the United States committed troops to Korea in July 1950, Mao began mobilizing units on the Chinese-Korean frontier as the Northeast Border Defense Army (21).
Meanwhile, discussions on intervention began within the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee. Although several committee members disapproved of intervention, Mao overrode their objections. While admitting that its economic price might well be high, he argued that intervention would demonstrate that the new China was finally "standing up" for itself in the world. Despite the misgivings of some cadres (notably PRC Premier Zhou Enlai, and his top general, Lin Biao, who declined to command China’s Korean forces), in late September and early October 1950 Mao succeeded in winning over the majority of his colleagues (22).

The Chinese stance benefited Stalin, a cautious leader who was unwilling to risk direct confrontation with the United States. In September 1950, Stalin refused Kim’s request for Soviet intervention and recommended instead that Kim seek Chinese help. Kim quickly followed this advice, while on 1 October Stalin himself suggested that China send "volunteers" (23).

At this juncture, Mao, in messages to Stalin that may have reflected either his genuine doubts or a calculated effort to persuade Russia to offer China more generous military assistance, appeared at least tentatively to decide against intervention in Korea. In response, Stalin coaxed him to enter the war, stressing the potential dangers to China of an American satellite Korean state on its border. Initially, his arguments appeared unsuccessful, and on 13 October Stalin issued provisional orders that North Korean forces and government should abandon the Korean peninsula entirely and retreat to the Soviet Union or China. Within a day he rescinded this order, once Mao informed him of the Chinese politburo’s ultimate decision to intervene in Korea, a choice for which he had apparently lobbied forcefully (24).

On 19 October 1950, massed units of the Northeast Border Defense Army began to cross China’s Yalu River border into North Korea, where they quickly turned the tide of battle, forcing United Nations troops back beyond the 38th parallel. After initial sweeping Chinese gains, U.N. forces recovered lost ground, and from late spring 1951 the war settled into a stalemate, with each side holding approximately the territory under its control in June 1950. Armistice negotiations opened in July 1951, dragging on inconclusively until a settlement was reached in July 1953.

How did the Korean War affect its protagonists domestically, and how did it alter the Cold War’s international aspects? Internally, it undoubtedly brought a hardening of attitudes within the United States, China, and North and South Korea, reinforcing demands for conformity and the suppression of dissent (25). Internationally, the Korean War represented a turning point in the extension of the Cold War to Asia and in United States commitments to that region, greatly enhancing American support for Taiwan, South Korea, and the French and non-Communist elements in Indochina. It also brought a massive and sustained enhancement of American military spending, the much increased United States contribution of troops to NATO, and the proliferation of American global strategic alliances and undertakings, effectively implementing NSC-68 (26).

One must doubt whether, without the Korean War, the United States would have signed security treaties with South Korea and Taiwan, or for that matter the ANZUS (1950) and SEATO (1953) Pacts with Australia and New Zealand and the Southeast Asian nations respectively. The United States assumed the role of patron to a variety of Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and eventually African client-states. In this role it effectively replaced the European colonial powers dispossessed in the Second World War’s aftermath by creating a new form of international empire, based on indirect and informal controls rather than outright colonialism (27). In this sense the impact of the Korean War was undoubtedly global, converting the Cold War into a truly worldwide struggle in which both the United States and the Soviet Union would regard all international developments as potentially related to their all-embracing rivalry. It set the character of international relations for decades to come. 

Endnotes
3. The Cold War International History Project, launched in 1991, has done much to make sources from former Communist bloc countries readily available. For further details, see the various issues of the Cold War International History Project Bulletin, and the project’s web site, <http://cwhp.si.edu>.
8. Stueck, Korean War, 31; and Lowe, Origins of the Korean War, 67-68.
9. Gaddis, We Now Know, 72-73; Jian Chen, China’s Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation.
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11. Gaddis, We Now Know, 75-77; Stueck, Korean War, 69; and Lowe, Origins of the Korean War, 77-80, 85-86.


14. Besides the works cited in the previous note, see also Ronald McColthlon, Controlling the Waves: Dean Acheson and U.S. Foreign Policy in Asia (New York: Norton, 1993), 137-62; and Chace, Acheson, 224.


16. Chen, China's Road, 164-71; Foot, Wrong War, 68-87; and Stueck, Korean War, 62-64, 87-91.


19. Chen, China's Road, 27-29, 153-55; and Zhang, Mao's Military Romanticism, 80-82.

20. Chen, China's Road, 146-50.

21. Chen, China's Road, 135-52; and Zhang, Mao's Military Romanticism, 55-68.


23. Gaddis, We Now Know, 78-80; Chen, China's Road, 161-62; and Goncharov, et al., Uncertain Partners, 174-75.

24. Gaddis, We Now Know, 79-80; Chen, China's Road, xxii; Stueck, Korean War, 98-103; and Mastny, Cold War, 104-7.


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