

# **The South Korean Military and the Korean War**

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## **The Weakness of the South Korean Forces and the Outbreak of the Korean War**

Immediately before the Japanese surrender in the Pacific War (1941-5), there was one Korea, though it had been under Japanese colonial rule for 36 years. The 38th parallel, which the American policymakers hastily picked out as the operational boundary between U.S. and Soviet troops in the Far East at the last stage of the Pacific War, divided one Korea into the two, North and South.<sup>1</sup> Soviet troops occupied North Korea, Americans entered the South, and the two sides began military occupation in the two Koreas. The latitude, which Washington policymakers conceived to be a temporary line to halt the further southward advance of Soviet troops and thereby physically eliminate the possibility of Soviet participation in the Japanese occupation, and to facilitate the process of establishing a Korean government "in due course," however, began to embrace new political and military connotations. The two Koreas, even on a temporary basis, thus appeared. The status of and situations in the two Koreas were almost the same at the beginning of the military occupations. In both parts of Korea, people were very poor mainly because of the harsh Japanese mobilization for conducting the Pacific War. There were neither major factories, nor organized indigenous troops, nor influential political groups except the strong popular desire to establish a Korean government right away. Almost every well-informed Korean had a distinctive idea about the future of Korea and the nature of its government. As a result, "too many" political organizations and parties were formed, and, especially, the American military government judged that the Koreans were "too much" politicized. All in all, the situations in the two parts of Korea were almost identical as much as the status of being the occupied. The policies and strategies of the two

occupiers—the United States and the Soviet Union—toward Korea, however, were different. Despite the wartime agreement with the United States that Korea should be independent "in due course," which meant that a Korean government should be established after the period of multinational trusteeship, the Soviet Union was not enthusiastic about the idea of multi-tutorship for Korea. Instead, the Soviet authority was busy in communizing the northern half of Korea, trying to make it a stronghold for securing the entire Korean peninsula. The Chief Soviet Delegate, Colonel General T. F. Shtykov, made it clear, at the Joint Commission convened in Seoul on March 20, 1946, that Korea should be "loyal to the Soviet Union, so that it will not become a base for an attack on the Soviet Union" in the future.<sup>2</sup> This Soviet position was directly contrary to the primary objective of the United States in Korea, that is, "to prevent Russian domination of Korea."<sup>3</sup> Unable to find a compromised solution on Korea through the Joint Commission, the United States internationalized the Korean issue by turning it over to the United Nations. The Soviet Union, however, did not accept the U.N. resolution that a Korean government would be established through holding a general election throughout Korea, and the Soviet authority in North Korea rejected the entry of U.N. representatives. As a result, the two Korean governments were created, one in the South blessed by the United Nations and the other in the North brewed by the Soviet Union, in August and September 1948 respectively.

After the North Korean government was established, the Soviet Union was quick and eager to help North Korea. It readily accepted the North Korean appeal that the occupation forces should be withdrawn as soon as possible, and informed the United States that it would pull out its troops from Korea by the end of 1948 and advised the United States to do likewise.<sup>4</sup> When the Soviet occupation forces withdrew, they turned over heavy weapons and equipment to the North Korean forces, and the Soviet government provided more. Stalin, the Soviet premier, received the North Korean delegation headed by Kim Il Sung, the North Korean premier. Kim Il Sung asked Stalin for Soviet assistance to defend the seashore at the meeting in Moscow on March 5, 1949; Stalin indicated his willingness to supply North Korea not only naval ships but also military aircraft. On March 7, 1949, when Kim asked for Stalin's permission to "liberate the whole country through military means," however, Stalin did not accept the idea by reasoning that "First of all, the Korean People's Army does not have an overwhelming superiority over the troops of the South. Second, in the South there are still American troops, which will interfere in case of hostilities. Third, one should not forget that the agreement is in effect

between the USSR and the United States on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. If the agreement is broken by our side, it is more of a reason to believe that Americans will interfere."<sup>5</sup> In September 1949, Kim once again asked Stalin for military action against the South by saying that North Korean forces "are capable of occupying South Korea in two weeks, at the maximum, it will take two months." Stalin ordered the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang to review the situation in Korea. After receiving the report from the Embassy in Pyongyang that the "North Korean Army was not strong enough to secure quick success, and, therefore, an extended fighting would provide Americans a good excuse to interfere in Korea and to agitate the Soviet Union elsewhere," Stalin "ordered" Kim not to attack South Korea, except when the South started an offensive against the North.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the Soviet Union under Stalin was very eager to have North Korea prepared, but very cautious in permitting it to act.

In January 1950, however, the North Korean leadership was buoyed by several developments. The Soviet Union successfully conducted a nuclear test in August 1949, nullifying the American monopoly of the atomic bomb. Mao and the Chinese Communists established a communist government on October 1, 1949, and drove out the Chinese Nationalists to Taiwan by the end of the year. The United States remained indifferent and acquiesced in the newly formed status of China. Furthermore, the then-U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson made public that Korea and Taiwan were excluded from the exclusive U.S. defense perimeter in the Far East in his National Press Club speech on January 12, 1950. Having been encouraged, Kim II Sung and his associates invited the Soviet Ambassador Shtykov to the dinner party hosted by North Korea's Foreign Minister Park Hon-young on January 17, 1950, stressing that "now when China is finishing its obligation, the next order of things is liberation of the Korean people in the South," and that Kim was eager to have "the advice of comrade Stalin concerning the situation in South Korea."<sup>7</sup> On January 30, 1950, Stalin, through Shtykov, informed Kim II Sung that he was ready to help and meet Kim.<sup>8</sup> At last, Kim II Sung secured "the green light" for his military adventure against South Korea, and Stalin was fully prepared to secure a "red" Korea.

Stalin's support and direction for military action in Korea was swift and decisive. Stalin approved to strengthen the North Korean Army to 10 divisions and invited Kim to Moscow for in-depth discussion of the matter.<sup>9</sup> Kim II Sung and Park Hon-young arrived in Moscow on March 30, 1950, and stayed there until April 25, 1950, during which time Kim met Stalin three times. Stalin emphasized that a thorough preparation for war be a "must," and that a detailed plan of offensive

must be drawn. He urged Kim to consult with Mao Zedong about the possible American intervention and acquire the Chinese support in case of American interference, because "the USSR was not ready to get involved in Korean affairs directly, especially, if Americans did venture to send troops to Korea."<sup>10</sup> Stalin promised to provide more weapons and mechanized means of movement and combat and emphasized the importance of having the North Korean forces fully mobilized by the summer of 1950. In the course of discussion about a detailed plan for the offensive, Stalin directed that "the highest bodies of power in North Korea make fresh proposals for peaceful unification. They'll be certainly rejected by the other side. Then, after they are rejected, a counterattack must take place."<sup>11</sup> Thus, Stalin's support and guidance for the offensive in Korea was total, and the North Korean forces were fully reinforced to obtain "an overwhelming superiority" over those of South Korea.

Unlike the Soviet Union under Stalin, the United States, the sole "could-be" sponsor of South Korea, was not enthusiastic about arming the South Korean forces. In March 1949, when Stalin assured Kim II Sung of providing heavy weapons and equipment, the U.S. National Security Council recommended President Truman to postpone the withdrawal date from the end of 1948 to June 30, 1949, because of the internal unrest in Korea.<sup>12</sup> When the South Korean president asked for the answer about what the United States would do "in case of a communist attack across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel," US Secretary of State Dean Acheson suggested, "ask the United Nations for help."<sup>13</sup> When Kim II Sung requested from Stalin the permission to launch a military offensive against South Korea, South Korean President Syngman Rhee "begged" President Truman for military aid, informing him that "we have ammunition available only for two days \_\_\_ we will not attack the territory north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel."<sup>14</sup> Instead of military assistance, President Rhee received "an admonitory advice" from President Truman that the development of a sound economy was far more important than amassing an "insupportable," large military force.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. Congress was not enthusiastic about providing aid to South Korea. President Truman was able to allocate only \$10.97 million for South Korea for the fiscal year 1950, from which only a few hundred dollars' worth of signal wire reached Korea before the outbreak of the Korean War.<sup>16</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson's remarks about the U.S. Defense Perimeter in the Far East on January 12, 1950, were a straightforward expression of the military and civilian policymakers in Washington at that time. Indeed, Korea was considered a burden rather than a responsibility and certainly not an asset to the American strategic vision.

The difference of the policies and strategies of the United States and the Soviet Union, in fact, created two different Koreas, especially in the military arena. Under Stalin's full support, the North Korean forces were armed with such heavy weapons and equipment as tanks, self-propelled and field artillery guns, and even military bombers and fighters. The North Korean army had 10 fully-armed divisions, three of which were "elite" and well-trained combat divisions to lead the offensive. Mao supplied North Korea with the Korean soldiers who had fought in the Chinese Civil War. Furthermore, the Soviet military advisers educated and trained the North Korean troops and were satisfied with their performance in the combined military exercises. Quite contrary, the South Korean forces were armed with mainly rifles, mortars, and a few light liaison aircraft. The South Korean army had only 8 undermanned divisions, four of which were forced to deploy in the southern part of South Korea in order to cope with the guerrillas in the mountainous areas. Most of them could complete only company-level training before the war broke out. One American military adviser even commented that "the South Korean forces were similar to those Americans in 1775 except enhanced patriotism." The Deputy Chief of KMAG (Col. John E. Baird) mentioned that "the South Korean forces were short of all weapons and equipments except rifles."<sup>17</sup> After 5 years' sponsorship of the Soviet Union and the United States, the two Koreas became totally different, especially in their military muscles.

The comparative weakness of the South Korean forces was a clear fact from which North Korea and its sponsors judged that a quick victory in Korea could easily be secured and, therefore, constituted the major cause of the Korean War. Especially for Kim Il Sung it appeared certain that the far superior North Korean forces could easily deprive the weaker South Korean forces of not only their capability but also their will to fight on, and obtain a complete victory before any effective American intervention materialized. The outcome of the battles at the first stage of the Korean War seemed to prove that these judgments and convictions were correct.

### **South Korean Molotov Cocktails against North Korean Tanks**

The North Korean and border constabulary invaded South Korea at four o'clock on the morning of June 25, 1950. The scale and tactics of the attack indicated that the invasion had been thoroughly pre-planned and prepared.<sup>18</sup> Massed artillery fire, coordinated columns of Soviet-made tanks (T-34s), and well-trained infantry overwhelmed the South Korean forces. The powerful, swift-moving tanks stunned the defenders and nearly enervated their will to fight, since they had no means to halt these iron-clad "monsters," and most South Korean

soldiers were seeing these tanks, self-propelled artillery pieces, and armored vehicles for the first time.

The South Korean forces did not match those of North Korea in number, training, weapons and equipments, and combat experience. They had been created, equipped, and trained for maintaining internal security and border stability. Coping with sabotage, subversion, and guerrilla activities instigated by North Korean infiltrators and local sympathizers, South Korean forces were forced to scatter throughout the country. Actually, four of the eight divisions were busy fighting guerrillas in the southern section of South Korea. Notably, the South Korean army had been on the alert for possible North Korean attacks for several weeks. But, on June 24, 1950, just one day before the actual North Korean invasion, the Army chief cancelled an emergent alertness order. Because of this "untimely" measure, only one-third of each of the four divisions deployed along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel were in position along the border at the time the war broke out, which meant that one South Korean battalion had to fight against one North Korean division reinforced with tanks and self-propelled artillery guns. The South Korean forces had no weapons, not one tank, but six obsolete liaison aircraft.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, South Korean officers lacked combat experience.

Facing the formidable North Korean attack, South Korean troops had to fight almost barehanded. Upon knowing that 2.36-inch bazookas were not effective against the Soviet-made T-34s, they organized "a suicidal group," approached the tanks, and threw a bundle of hand grenades with Molotov cocktails into the turrets of the North Korean tanks. Moreover, after fighting for three days, South Korean forces were out of ammunition. Seoul fell into the hands of North Korean troops on June 28, 1950. South Korean forces were in no position to fight on. Without the outside help, it was impossible for them not only to recover the antebellum status quo but also to maintain the front itself.

Despite desperate but "heroic" actions and some success, the result of the initial battles was nearly a debacle. The 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment gave up the Ongjin peninsula, 1<sup>st</sup> Division in the Kaesung area retreated individually, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division in the Uijongboo sector was nearly disintegrated, the 6<sup>th</sup> Division in the Choonchun and Hongchun region, though it had inflicted heavy damages upon the North Korean 2<sup>nd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> divisions, could not hold on, and the 8<sup>th</sup> division of the East Coast, after the coastal road of retreat was cut off, was forced to withdraw through the inland road, leaving the coastal area undefended. Although the South Korean army committed 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> divisions, academy cadets, and untrained soldiers to the battle, it could not halt the North

Korean forces. In fact, it was inconceivable for the South Korean forces alone to recover the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, much less to continue any defensive operations.<sup>20</sup>

Fortunately, the actions of the United States and the United Nations were swift and decisive. It was quickly decided to have American ground troops committed to the battle for a U.N. "police action" in Korea. In order to make American intervention practically meaningful, however, the South Korean forces should hold the Han River Line for "at least" a week, the period necessary for the deployment of American troops then stationed in Japan. The South Korean army hastily created the Combat Command in Seeheung, just below the Han River, assembled the retreating soldiers, organized them in "X mixed battalion," and deployed those mixed battalions along the Han River under the control of the "mixed Capital Division" and so on. On the other hand, the North Korean forces named the 3, 4, and 105 tank divisions as the "Seoul" division to commemorate the capture of Seoul. It was a queer contrast between the two prefixes, the "mixed" that was hastily attached to the South Korean battalions and divisions and the "Seoul" that was commemoratively affixed on the North Korean divisions. Anyway, the South Korean forces could hold the Han River Line until July 3, 1950, making American ground troops' engagement tactically meaningful.<sup>21</sup>

#### **South Korean Forces together with U.S. and U.N. Forces**

Major civilian and military leaders in Washington, New York, and Tokyo acted swiftly. They considered the North Korean attack on South Korea as a direct challenge against the prestige of the United States and the United Nations that had helped the creation of South Korea, and, especially, U.S. President Truman judged that "The foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on Korea could be stopped."<sup>22</sup> At the urgent request of the American government, the U.N. Security Council held a special session on the Sunday afternoon of June 25, 1950 (New York local time), and adopted a resolution determining the North Korean attack was "a breach of peace" and calling upon North Korea to cease hostilities and upon the members of the United Nations for "every assistance" to restore peace in Korea.<sup>23</sup> On the same day, at the Blair House Meeting, President Truman ordered support for South Korea with additional supplies, a complete survey of the situation, and, notably, the preparation of "plans to wipe out all Soviet air bases in the Far East," and emphasized that the United States was working for the United Nations.<sup>24</sup> At the request of the South Korean government, the U.N. Security Council adopted another resolution on June 27, 1950,

calling upon all U.N. members for "every assistance" to repel aggression in Korea.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. Congress and the American public supported President Truman for his measures taken in dealing with the Korean incident. General MacArthur, the then-commander of the Far East Command, flew to Korea and was welcomed by the North Korean mortar fires fired from Seoul at the southern bank of the Han River. On the way back to Tokyo, MacArthur urgently requested President Truman to send U.S. ground troops to Korea. President Truman approved the request at the dawn of June 30, 1950.<sup>26</sup> Once again, the U.N. Security Council adopted another resolution and empowered the United States to coordinate U.N. assistance and direct U.N. operations in Korea on July 7, 1950. The next day, President Truman designated the Joint Chiefs of Staff as his agents for the U.N. operations in Korea, and named General MacArthur as the commander of all U.N. forces in Korea.<sup>27</sup> On July 14, 1950, South Korean President Syngman Rhee also put the South Korean forces under the operational control of the U.N. commander.<sup>28</sup> By these measures, the United States and the United Nations fully intervened in Korea to save, as the U.N. Secretary General Trygve Lie termed, "one of the children of the United Nations," and all the forces fighting in Korea were operationally controlled by the U.N. commander.<sup>29</sup>

However, the initial performances of the defending forces were not satisfactory. "Task Force Smith," the first contingent of U.S. troops, which MacArthur named "an arrogant display of American military muscle," lost more than half of its men and equipment after a single encounter with the North Koreans. U.S. 24<sup>th</sup>, the first division deployed, was outnumbered and the Division Commander, Major General William Dean, himself became a prisoner of war.<sup>30</sup> South Korean forces that defended the middle and eastern front under the operational control of the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Army Commander Walton H. Walker, who was in charge of the actual military operations in Korea, were forced to withdraw despite the several tactical successes. On July 22, the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Cavalry and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions were put into the battle area, but did no better. Furthermore, the North Korean 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Divisions advanced through the southwestern part of South Korea in order to capture Pusan via Masan. Facing this formidable advance, General Walker decided to form a connected defensive line along the Nakdong River and, on July 29, 1950, ordered an orderly withdrawal across the Nakdong River for a final stand.<sup>31</sup> The defending forces were trapped in the so-called "Pusan Perimeter," though, ironically, for the first time since the outbreak of the war, they formed a coordinated defensive line and zone as dictated by the field manual.

The battles along the Nakdong defense line were no less bitter than

the previous ones. Despite the heavy casualties suffered by the continuous gunfire and air bombardments, the North Korean forces launched two formidable attacks across the Nakdong River, one in August and the other in September 1950. General MacArthur, who judged that securing the Pusan Perimeter was mandatory for the bold amphibious operations, deployed even the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines, designated as the main body for the landing, for the defense of the Perimeter. The South Korean forces fought fiercely for the defense of the north and northeastern part of the Perimeter, and the British ground troops joined the battle in the Perimeter's west and southwestern sector that the American forces defended. General Walker always formed ad hoc mobile reserve task forces and threw those into the counteroffensive wherever and whenever the front was being broken through by the North Korean troops. As a result, by September 12, 1950, the North Korean offensive was largely spent. North Korean "all-court-pressing" attacks were overridden by Walker's "all-court-filling" defense. The South Korean and U.N. forces won a defensive battle along the Nakdong River and prevented a Dunkirk in Korea, securing the base for a bold amphibious envelopment.

The dazzling success of the Inchon landing and the subsequent breakthrough across the Nakdong defensive line marked the counteroffensive phase of the fighting. After Inchon the North Korean forces collapsed. By connecting the landing and chasing forces, the North Korean troops were divided, and the main retreating road of the North Korean 1<sup>st</sup> Corps was cut off. Seoul was reclaimed on September 28, 1950. The South Korean and U.N. forces reached the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by the end of September 1950. At the urgent order from President Syngman Rhee, the South Korean troops on the eastern coast crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel on October 1, 1950, and entered Wonsan on October 10, 1950, making another amphibious operation on that city into an administrative landing practice. From this time on, especially, the South Korean and U.N. forces advanced to the North as if they had a race among the friendly units, disregarding the coordination with the adjacent units. In fact, the South Korean troops won the race. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division entered Pyongyang first. The 6<sup>th</sup> Division reached the Yalu River first. However, the front was not connected, and the units were scattered. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army in the western front and the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps in the east were not linked, leaving the mountainous area in the middle undefended. Furthermore, the advancing troops were not prepared for the severe winter in the North. Despite these pitfalls, however, it seemed that Korean unification, which had not been realized by the negotiations either in Seoul or New York, could be realized by military operations.

At this juncture of optimism, China entered the scene with its "volunteer forces," and the Korean War entered what MacArthur termed "an entirely new war." The Chinese forces crossed the Yalu River from October 19, 1950, on. At first, they tried to wipe out the spearheads of the South Korean 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Divisions, advance to the rear of U.S. and U.N. troops and attack them simultaneously in the front and rear, and secure the territorial base for the further offensive. After securing the base above the Chongchun River, the Chinese troops retreated to the mountainous area and examined the strength and weakness of the U.S. forces for the next moves. By MacArthur's order, however, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the South Korean forces launched an "end-of-war offensive" on November 24, 1950, only to find that the Chinese forces intervened at full strength. MacArthur ordered the commanders of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and 10<sup>th</sup> Corps to withdraw. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the South Korean troops in the western front retreated until they formed a defense line along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, whereas the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps and the South Koreans in the east were evacuated from Heungnam through ships by December 24, 1950. Making the situation worse, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army commander, General Walton H. Walker, who had defended the Pusan Perimeter by the order of "stand or die," was killed in a car accident near Uijongbu on December 23, 1950: In name and fact, the South Korean and U.N. forces were in chaos.

The Chinese offensive continued. Despite the Commander of the Chinese forces Peng Teh-huai's desire for the Chinese troops to recuperate for a while and to launch an offensive in the spring of 1951, Mao urged Peng to push back U.N. forces without a pause. The Chinese troops launched the third offensive on December 31, 1950, known as the "New Year's Offensive."<sup>32</sup> Also, the Chinese forces launched their large-scale offensives in February, April, and May.

General Matthew B. Ridgway, the new 8<sup>th</sup> Army commander, who then commanded all U.N. forces including 10<sup>th</sup> Corps and the South Korean forces, tried to block the Chinese offensives through inflicting maximum damage upon the Chinese with superior firepower, while minimizing the casualties of the friendly forces by employing the flexible tactics of withdrawal and counterattacks. Understanding that the Chinese offensive would usually be spent within a week, Ridgway ordered to attack the Chinese immediately after their offensive so that they could not have time to reorganize and recuperate. Also, Ridgway stressed the close coordination with the adjacent units and the maintenance of the connected front in order not be infiltrated and encircled by the Chinese. In this judgment, Ridgway could easily give up Seoul again without enduring the heavy casualties for holding the city. But he emphasized the importance of offensive spirit based on the

traditional army slogan: "Find them! Fix them! Fight them! Finish them!"<sup>33</sup> Through conducting a series of sensible counterattacks, Ridgway blocked the Chinese offensives and recovered the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by the end of March 1951.<sup>34</sup> The South Korean troops fought fiercely along with U.S. and U.N. soldiers. The battlefield was being stabilized.

While the South Korean and U.N. forces were fighting with the Chinese and North Koreans in the battlefield, General MacArthur was quarreling with Washington policymakers. Defining the Korean War as "an entirely new war" after the Chinese intervention, MacArthur had urged taking such bold measures as bombing Manchuria and a naval blockade of China. But Washington policymakers were annoyed by the fact that the United States was fighting with "enemy No. 2" in Korea, while "enemy No. 1" was enjoying the fighting. In other words, Washington was dismayed to learn that the United States was playing "a Soviet game." At this frustrating moment, MacArthur, who had complained that Washington imposed a strange strategy of "die for tie" upon him, disclosed his conviction that "there is no substitute for victory" in his letter to the then-minority leader of the House, Joseph W. Martin. This was a direct contradiction to the President Truman's view that "there is right kind and a wrong kind victory."<sup>35</sup> MacArthur was removed on April 11, 1951. Ridgway was appointed as the new U.N. commander. Lt. General James A. Van Fleet was also named as the new 8<sup>th</sup> Army commander.

The dismissal of MacArthur typified a direct clash between the two concepts of war and victory. MacArthur, who had been trained to espouse the traditional concept, "In war, there is no substitute for victory," and had fought the Pacific War (1941 -5) in that concept, could not and did not accept the notion of "limited war." President Truman and his advisers, however, could not tolerate the fighting with the second team—China—while the first one—the Soviet Union—remained untouched, and judged that even winning the war with China in Korea would not contribute to American prestige. The concept that "In war, there is a substitute for victory" was about to be materialized.

At last, the United States secured stability on the three fronts: the battlefield through conducting a series of determined counterattacks by the South Korean and U.N. forces; the diplomatic front in the United Nations by castigating communist China as an aggressor on January 31, 1951; and the Tokyo front by appointing a new military commander who was amenable to Washington's direction. Now Washington was prepared to find an "honorable" compromise in Korea by imposing the maximum military and political pressures upon the communists.

The South Korean and U.N. forces repulsed the Chinese offensives,

one in the west in April and the other in the east in May 1951, and secured the Kansas-Wyoming Line that had been designed to hold for the truce as a contact line. Recognizing that the major Chinese offensives had not been successful in dividing and encircling the defending units, Mao ordered Peng to conduct "a number of small operations against Anglo-American troops" based on the "hit and run" tactics in order to demoralize their combat spirit and self-confidence.<sup>36</sup> Stalin was opposed to Mao's tactics, saying that

This tactic is a risky one; it can be applied successfully only once or twice. The British and Americans will easily understand the plan; ... they will not allow you each time to withdraw to the north without damage to the forces\_\_\_there is no reason to believe that the Anglo-Americans are as stupid as Chang Kai-shek. ...<sup>37</sup>

Despite this Soviet advice, the Chinese troops were in no position to launch a major offensive because of the heavy casualties and the extreme shortage of supplies. Also, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army commander was not allowed to launch a large-scale offensive, and, instead, he was permitted to conduct a limited operation in order to push up the contact line or secure the high ground for defensive purposes. As a result, the battlefield was stalemated.

#### **Armistice under Heavy Arms and some Frustrations**

After the fierce fighting for almost one year, both sides, having acknowledged that the Korean issue was too complex to be settled by military means only, were obliged to find "a substitute for victory" in order to end the war.

Washington moved first. The American government made several fruitless attempts to obtain a signal from the communists in Paris, Hong Kong, and Moscow in early May 1951. After these futile efforts, Secretary of State Dean Acheson undertook the matter directly. In mid-May 1951, Acheson summoned George F. Kennan, who was then on leave from the State Department studying at Princeton, to Washington. Acheson asked Kennan to contact Jacob Malik, the Soviet delegate to the United Nations, and clarify American intentions in Korea and probe those of the Soviet Union. On June 1, 1951, the two diplomats met at Malik's residence on Long Island, where Kennan delivered to Malik American intention to settle the Korean War by negotiations and asked the Soviet position on the issue. Unable to give an outright answer to the question, Malik arranged another meeting on June 5, 1951, at which

Malik told Kennan that the Soviet Union desired a peaceful settlement in Korea as soon as possible. Malik also advised that the United States should approach the North Koreans and the Chinese directly, since the Soviet Union would not participate in the discussion of a cease-fire.<sup>38</sup> By this, the United States and the Soviet Union were willing to end the fighting by negotiations.

Moscow moved next. While the American government was fumbling around for a face-saving procedure for the initiation of the truce talks, Malik, in his U.N. radio speech on June 23, 1951, suggested an initial step for the talks by saying that "As a first step discussions should be started between the belligerents for a cease-fire and an armistice providing for the mutual withdrawal of forces from the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel."<sup>39</sup> The Soviet government confirmed that Malik's view was its position, clarifying that the Soviet government desired to conclude an armistice without touching any political or territorial matters.<sup>40</sup>

Washington policymakers discussed the matter of how to initiate the truce talks. State officials wanted to have the negotiations at the military level as the Soviet government had suggested. Military leaders were reluctant to assume the burden for initiating the talks, especially Air Force Chief General Vandenberg, who argued that "the burden of initiating talks should be imposed on the enemy by penalizing him more severely."<sup>41</sup> However, policymakers in Washington decided to initiate and hold the talks through the military channel in the field, because by doing so it would be possible to exclude such thorny political issues as the status of Formosa and the Chinese representation in the United Nations.<sup>42</sup>

By Washington's direction, the U.N. Commander General Ridgway delivered a radio message on June 30, 1951, announcing that "... I am informed that you may wish a meeting to discuss an armistice. ... I propose that such a meeting could take place aboard a Danish hospital ship in Wonsan harbor."<sup>43</sup> The response of the communists was quick. On July 1, 1951, Peking radio broadcast a joint message from the North Korean and Chinese Commanders in Korea that

**We are authorized to inform you that we agree to meet your representative for conducting the talks concerning cessation of military action and establishment of peace. We propose that the place of meeting be in the area of Kaesong on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel; if you agree, our representatives are prepared to meet your representatives between July 10 and 15, 1951.**<sup>44</sup>

After several preparatory meetings, both sides agreed to meet in Kaesong on July 10, 1951. At last, the two sides in Korea were

prepared to open the talks in order to search for "a substitute for victory."

However, it was extremely difficult for both parties to reach an agreement on the contents of "a substitute for victory." Despite both sides agreeing to the agenda on July 26, 1951, the communists insisted that the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel be the demarcation line, whereas the U.N. side asserted that the demarcation line be the contact line. Unable to find common ground on the demarcation line, the communists unilaterally called off the meeting on August 23, 1951. Ridgway immediately intensified military actions, including bombing of Najin that had been intentionally excluded from the target list. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, being determined to use the atomic bomb if American troops faced "a military disaster," obtained President Truman's approval and ordered the U.S. Air Force to conduct a "simulated atomic strike" in Korea to demonstrate American determination and capability of using the bombs if necessary. The U.S. Air Force carried out several mock atomic strikes in Korea under the code name "Hudson Harbor" in October 1951,<sup>45</sup> Perhaps thanks to an intensified U.N. military pressure and a U.N. apology on the accidental strafing of Kaesong on September 10, 1951, the communists agreed to hold the talks at Panmunjom, south of Kaesong, the place on the then-contact line. The meetings at Panmunjom, however, showed how tortuous the road to an armistice could be.

After the tangled back-and-forth arguments on the demarcation line, both sides agreed to the contact line fixed by the staff officers on November 27, 1951. Furthermore, the two sides agreed that the fixed line with a demilitarized zone of 4 km would become the demarcation line if the two belligerents signed the armistice within 30 days, no matter what changes were made during this period.<sup>46</sup> Although the agreement on a provisional demarcation line did not constitute a de facto cease-fire, it itself actually eliminated the possibility of either moving up the Yalu River or being pushed down to the Nakdong River in the battlefield. There appeared "a substitute for victory."

The next thorny issue was the prisoner of war problem on the principle of "voluntary" or "forced" repatriation, without which the fighting in Korea could have ended sooner. After the initial vacillations, the U.N. side upheld the principle of "voluntary" repatriation of the POWs, whereas the communist side strongly asserted the "forced" repatriation of all war prisoners. The very fact that there were many communist POWs who did not want to be repatriated was a vital blow to the communist propaganda that a communist world would be a "paradise" for all people. By the same token, the fact would be a good propaganda resource for the free world, especially the United

States. President Truman was determined to uphold the principle of free exchange of POWs in February 1951 by declaring that "the United States would not and could not accept an agreement demanding the forced repatriation of those prisoners-of-war whose lives would be endangered, ... so I refused to agree to any solution that provided for the return against their will of prisoners-of-war to communist domination."<sup>47</sup> On the issue of principle in dealing with the war prisoners, Stalin was no less determined than Truman. Stalin cabled Mao that "your firm position has already given positive results and must make the adversary agree to further concessions."<sup>48</sup> There was no room for compromise for the two leaders of the ideologically divided East-West blocs on the issue of ideological principle.

As the talks stalled, the military actions in the battlefield were intensified. Mao had asked Stalin to provide weapons and equipment necessary for arming 60 divisions. Stalin, promising Mao to supply weapons and equipment for 10 divisions in 1951 and for other the 50 divisions in 1952, 1953, and the first half of 1954, insisted that

**The Americans in general are not capable of conducting a big war, especially, after the Korean War. All their strength is in air raids, in the atomic bomb. America cannot defeat a small Korea. Firmness is required in dealing with America. Chinese comrades must know that if America doesn't lose this war, then the Chinese will never get Taiwan.**<sup>49</sup>

The battles continued all along the contact line to secure the high ground, impose heavy casualties on each other, and demoralize the will of the opposing troops. The U.N. Command bombed North Korean power plants, railroads, and communication lines to demoralize the North Korean fighting will and block the flow of supplies to the front. The fighting at the stalemated front was no less severe than before.

The death of Stalin became a breakthrough in the deadlocked talks for the truce. On March 19, 1953, the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union made a decision to end the war in Korea, and informed Mao and Kim II Sung of the decision. On the morning of March 29, 1953, the Soviet special envoys, Kuznetsov and Fedorenko, personally informed Kim II Sung that the Soviet government had decided to change "the strategy in Korea: from war to peace," and delivered the Soviet document of the Council's decision to Kim. They reported Kim's reaction by saying that "Kim II Sung heard our comments and became very agitated."<sup>50</sup> By the Soviet decision and action, the communist side abandoned its insistence on the ideological principle in dealing with the POWs and hastened the process of the armistice talks.

The long battle for the principle of voluntary repatriation was over, and the U.N. Command won an ideological battle in Korea.<sup>51</sup>

Both sides began to work on the demarcation line, reflecting the changes that had resulted from the battles fought since November 27, 1951, and finally agreed to a modified demarcation line on June 17, 1953. Despite the signing procedure yet to be agreed, the armistice in the Korean War was about to be realized. In fact, there was "a substitute for victory."

In order to secure "a substitute for victory" in Korea, the United States tried to implement the two kinds of measures: one military and the other political. Recognizing that the very weakness of the South Korean forces had provoked the "unprovoked" North Korean invasion, and that strong South Korean fighting capability was required for conducting the fighting, the United States tried to strengthen the South Korean forces step by step. The United States military approved the ceilings of the South Korean Army: 250,000 (10 infantry divisions and supporting units) on April 18, 1951; 357,000 (3 Corps, 10 infantry divisions and 10 division artillery, and supporting units) on June 25, 1952. Finally, on May 15, 1953, the United States approved 655,000 (1 Army, 4 Corps, 20 infantry divisions, and supporting units) as the ceiling in the after-truce period.<sup>52</sup> By these measures, the South Korean Army became a strong one, far different from the one of 90,000 men armed with rifles before the war. The South Korean Navy was also strengthened from the one with 28 patrol boats and 6,000 men before the war to the larger one armed with 59 battleships and patrol boats and 12,000 men. The South Korean Marines was enlarged from 1,200 to 22,200.<sup>53</sup> Also, the South Korean Air Force became strengthened from the one with 22 light liaison aircraft and 1,800 men before the war to the strengthened one armed with 110 aircraft, including 80 F-51 fighters, and 11,000 men.<sup>54</sup> After the three years of fighting, in quantity and quality of the combat power the strength of the South Korean forces was far superior to that from before the war. Military measures to guarantee the armistice in Korea materialized.

Politically, in order to deter another communist adventure and ensure the armistice in Korea, the United States and U.N. members planned to issue a "greater sanctions" declaration, warning of the grave consequence of any renewed aggression in Korea. However, President Syngman Rhee of South Korea, having experienced that a U.N. security guarantee could not deter the North Korean invasion, demanded a bilateral security pact with the United States, the one like NATO. Rhee, who had mobilized almost all South Koreans against a truce, acted for his cause. On the night of June 17-18, 1953, by Rhee's order, more than 25,000 anti-communist Korean POWs escaped from the four

major prison camps with the full connivance of the South Korean security guards.<sup>55</sup> President Rhee readily accepted his responsibility, by saying that "...the anti-communist Korean War prisoners should have been released long before this..."<sup>56</sup> "Communism is still our principal enemy in Korea" was President Eisenhower's response to Rhee's "presumptuous" action.<sup>57</sup> But Washington accepted the option that the United States would enter into a mutual defense treaty with South Korea, similar to the one with the Philippines and the ANZUS, provided that the South Korean government would agree to an armistice and the UNC control of its forces.

In this way, the United States swallowed "a substitute for a greater sanctions declaration" to save "a substitute for victory," that is, a mutual defense pact to secure an armistice. The armistice in Korea, a viable compromise between "no more blood" for the United States and "no more aggression" for South Korea, was about to be implemented under heavy arms and some frustrations.

### **ROK-US Security Alliance and the Deterrence of another Korean War**

The mutual defense treaty between the Republic of Korea and the United States, "a substitute for actual fighting," opened a new era in relations between the two countries. By this treaty—which was initialed in Seoul on August 8, 1953, signed in Washington on October 1, 1953, and finally ratified by the South Korean Assembly on January 14, 1954, and by the United States Senate on January 26, 1954—the United States became the sole protector of South Korea against the communists and assumed unilateral responsibility for the security of South Korea, an obligation which it had tried to avoid since its temporary occupation. Also, by this treaty, the South Korean government was prohibited from taking any "unlawful means" to change the status quo in Korea. In this sense, the treaty strongly urged both Koreas not to use any "violent means" for the sake of changing the status quo that had been established as a result of fighting in the Korean War.

After nearly fifty years, the security alliance between South Korea and the United States, which was formalized by the mutual defense treaty and has been visualized by the presence of American forces and the combined command structure of the two nations' forces, still remains in force as the backbone of an allied relationship between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America, deterring another Korean war and, therefore, in a practical sense, promoting rapprochement in Korea. In this sense, the strong South Korean military, which had been mandatory for the actual fighting in the

Korean War, has become an imperative element for making the ROK-U.S. security alliance meaningful, another military adventure in Korea impossible, and any political rapprochement on Korea viable in the future.

## Notes

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