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The Korean War, 1950–53: from maneuver to stalemate

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The Korean War is an immensely important event in twentieth century history. The first shooting war of the Cold War, the first United Nations War, and the only time that two major military powers have clashed on the battlefield since World War II, it has been largely forgotten by all—save for the Koreans, for whom the war continues. Although it began in June 1950, its roots extend back to the Japanese takeover of Korea in 1910 and the partition of the Peninsula at the end of World War II. In this concise yet analytical account, the author discusses the inability of the major powers to agree on a Korean government and the partition of Korea into two hostile regimes. He treats the factors prompting the North Korean invasion and the reasons for Soviet and Chinese support, the military balance at the start of the war, the factors prompting U.S. intervention, and the course of the war to include the Chinese intervention and the transition from a war of maneuver into one of stalemate. He also addressed the factors delaying an armistice agreement, assesses the costs and wide-reaching consequences of the war, and identifies areas for possible further study.

The Korean War was a watershed event in the history of the twentieth century. It was both the first shooting war of the Cold War and the first limited war of the nuclear age. The war was also the first conflict waged under United Nations auspices and the only time since World War II that two major powers—the United States and China—have met on the battlefield. Intermittent fighting had been occurring in Korea since the end of World War II, but on June 25, 1950 the armed forces of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) mounted a conventional invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) across the 38th Parallel.1

Situated as it was between the major powers of China, Russia, and Japan, Korea was fated to have a stormy history. The country was long the nexus of big-power confrontation and war, first between China and Japan and then between Japan and Russia. After having defeated both China and Russia, in 1905 Japan declared a protectorate over Korea and in 1910 it formally annexed the entire Korean peninsula. Korea has been a single entity during its modern history, however. The 38th parallel is simply an arbitrary political line that divides a country forming a single geographic and ethnic unit.

The division of Korea (as well as Vietnam, another post-World War II hot spot) into two hostile states resulted from arbitrary decisions taken at the end of the Second World War concerning the surrender of Japanese forces and administration

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of territory occupied by Japan. In these decisions, neither the Vietnamese nor the Koreans were consulted.

Korea did not figure greatly in U.S. foreign policy until World War II. This changed with the war in the Pacific. U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt was determined to get the Soviet Union into the war against Japan in order to reduce anticipated heavy American casualties in an invasion of the Japanese home islands, even if the price for this might be temporary Soviet occupation of much of Northeast Asia. Roosevelt also staked his presidency on cooperation with the Soviet Union, which he saw as essential in preserving stability in the post-war world.

In endeavoring to reach some arrangement with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin on the future of Northeast Asia, Roosevelt and his advisors proposed that a postwar international trusteeship be set up for Korea under the United States, Great Britain, China, and the Soviet Union. Although Allied leaders discussed this concept from time to time, no agreement was reached on details.

Meeting in Cairo in November 1943, U.S., British, and Chinese leaders declared that Korea should become free and independent “in due course,” words that clearly implied some temporary period of external supervision. At the following Teheran Conference, Stalin endorsed the declaration. At the February 1945 Yalta Conference, when the Soviet leader confirmed his pledge to enter the war against Japan “two or three months” after the defeat of Germany, the wartime Allies discussed Korea and agreed to a four-power trusteeship but, again, there were no details.

Roosevelt died in April 1945, and U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated thereafter, but the wartime alliance between the United States and Soviet Union had been a marriage of convenience only. This became clear with the end of the fighting in Europe, when Soviet territorial and security demands became manifest. New U.S. President Harry S. Truman now took a harder line toward Moscow.

At the July 1945 Potsdam Conference, the Allied Chiefs of Staff discussed U.S.–Soviet military operations when Russia entered the war, but again there was no substantial discussion of the future of Korea. While the Potsdam talks were under way, the United States successfully tested an atomic bomb in New Mexico, and some U.S. officials now believed that, if dropped on Japan, the atomic bomb might cause Japan to conclude peace without a U.S. invasion of its home islands. Growing concerns about the Soviets also led the U.S. military to begin planning for a possible occupation of Japanese-held Korea.

On August 10, 1945, after two atomic bombs had been dropped and the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan, the Japanese did indeed request an armistice. This spurred efforts to secure a Korean occupation agreement. Two U.S. Army staff officers, colonels Charles H. Bonesteel III and Dean Rusk, drafted an order to define the Allied authority to which the Japanese forces in each area of the Far East would surrender. With Soviet troops rapidly advancing in Manchuria and the nearest U.S. troops 600 miles from Korea on Okinawa, they were instructed to secure the best possible territorial arrangement. Bonesteel and Rusk recommended the 38th parallel, which divided the country roughly in half and placed the Korean capital of Seoul in the American zone. President Truman approved this arrangement on August 15, and it was sent to Moscow. Stalin did not object. On August 15, Tokyo agreed to Allied surrender terms, and on September 8, U.S. occupation forces began arriving at the Korean port of Incheon.
The occupiers of the Korean peninsula, north and south, found a land seething with pent-up political frustration and rampant nationalism, all fueled by returning exiles. Koreans of whatever political stripe, having suffered nearly a half century of Japanese occupation, wanted immediate independence and not a trusteeship or allied occupation. Certainly they did not want a divided nation. But few outside of Korea thought of these arrangements as anything other than temporary.

Both the Soviets and the Americans each now installed a group of Korean advisers in their two zones. These were hardly democratic and were certainly strongly conservative in the American zone and staunchly pro-communist in the northern zone. Meanwhile, in December 1945 at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers, there were calls for a provisional Korean democratic government under a five-year trusteeship of the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China, but subsequent attempts of a joint Soviet–American commission to implement this agreement failed. In December 1946 a legislative assembly opened in the American zone.

By September 1947, frustrated with the failure to settle the future of Korea by direct negotiation with the Soviet Union, the United States referred the problem to the United Nations. The UN General Assembly recognized Korea’s right to independence and planned for the establishment of a unified government and withdrawal of the occupation forces. It established the UN Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) with the goal of securing a free and independent Korea. In January 1948, UNTCOK representatives arrived in Seoul to supervise elections for a national constituent assembly.

UNTCOK was refused admission to the Soviet zone, and it then recommended elections in South Korea for a new national assembly. This assembly met in Seoul at the end of May 1948 and invited representatives of the North to attend, but the invitation was ignored. In August 1948 the Republic of Korea (ROK) was officially proclaimed with a strong presidential regime headed by the staunchly conservative former exile Syngman Rhee. Washington wanted stability, although its slavish support of Rhee drew the enmity of many Korean democrats. The U.S. military government was terminated and the new Korean government entered into an agreement with the United States for the training of its forces.

In September 1948 the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), which also claimed authority over the entire country, was inaugurated in North Korea under the presidency of veteran Communist Kim Il Sung. Kim elbowed out the pro-Chinese Yan’an faction and became the paramount leader.

In December the United Nations General Assembly endorsed South Korea as having the country’s only lawfully elected Korean government. That same month the Soviet Union announced it had withdrawn all its forces from North Korea. The United States completed withdrawal of its occupation forces from the South in June 1949.

In September 1949, UNTCOK reported its failure to mediate between the two Korean states and warned of impending civil war. Beginning in April 1948, there had been sporadic fighting. Indeed, American historian Allan Millett states unequivocally that the Korean War began on April 3, 1948 with the Jeju-do Rebellion in which Communist guerrillas mounted attacks against the South Korean government. Estimates of the dead in the rebellion during 1948–1950 range from 30,000 to as many as 100,000 people. There were also clashes along the 38th Parallel involving battalion-size units on both sides that claimed hundreds of lives. Two of the largest
were launched by the DPRK south of the 38th Parallel on the Ongjin peninsula in May and August 1949.

Both Rhee and Kim Il Sung were fervent nationalists determined to unify their country during their lifetimes. Rhee’s support for a possible military solution to the reunification question in fact led the U.S. State Department to go out of its way to disassociate itself from these activities. In April 1948 President Truman approved a policy statement to the effect that the United States should not become so irrevocably involved that an action taken by any faction in Korea or by any other power there could be considered a cause for war for the United States. This U.S. government attempt to adopt a hands-off policy encouraged Kim in his belief that the United States would not fight for Korea. Then on January 12, 1950 U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson further distanced the United States when, in the course of a speech to the National Press Club, he specifically excluded both Korea and Formosa (Taiwan) from the Asian “defensive perimeter” of vital strategic interests that the United States would fight to defend.

The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff reached the same conclusion and in 1949, in two separate interviews, U.S. commander in the Far East General Douglas MacArthur outlined a defense perimeter for the United States that excluded Taiwan as well as Korea. Republicans in Congress then demanded a U.S. defense for Formosa, but no such move was made regarding Korea.

Then, on June 25, 1950, North Korean forces mounted a massive invasion of South Korea. For years the Communist Bloc claimed steadfastly that the war had begun in a South Korean attack of the North, that Rhee had hoped thereby to bring about American involvement and a war in which the two Koreas would be reunited under his leadership. The Communists maintained that North Korean, Soviet, and Chinese policy was merely reactive. This position found a supporter in books written by U.S. scholar Bruce Cumings, but historian Youngho Kim disproves this argument and the theory that the war began with border clashes and escalated into a wider war in his well-documented 1998 book, The Origins and Development of the Korean War. Kim points out that border clashes diminished in the period from October 1949 to the spring of 1950, because Stalin sought to prevent the possibility of a war developing before the North was completely ready. Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko informed Ambassador to the DPRK Colonel General Terenti Shtykov that Pyongyang must cease all military operations without prior approval from Moscow, and the border between north and south remained quiet until the June invasion. This draw-down in the fighting is confirmed in U.S. Far East Command reports of this period.

The timing of the North Korean attack was conditioned by the need to plant rice in March and then harvest it in September. Until the breakup of the Soviet Union, the reasons behind it were shrouded in mystery. At the time many observers saw the invasion as an effort by the Communist world to divert U.S. attention from Europe where the Russians had just suffered a rebuff in the Berlin blockade. Others considered it to be “soft-spot” probing to test U.S. resolve, or a demonstration to show the world that America was a paper tiger. Some even thought it to be part of an elaborate plot by Stalin to unseat Mao Zedong in China. Whatever the reasons, most Americans believed that Moscow had initiated events in Korea as part of some global chess move.
But the reasons behind the invasion were local, not global. Political opposition to Syngman Rhee’s government was growing, and Kim Il Sung judged that Rhee might be about to fall from power. Given the announced American position and Kim’s own attitude, the moment seemed ripe for an invasion. He had sought Soviet support as early as September 1949 for a military operation to seize the Ongjin peninsula and perhaps territory south of the 38th parallel all the way to Kaesong. The Soviets demurred, believing that it would result in a protracted civil war that would be disadvantageous to the North and to the Soviets, allowing the United States to increase aid to the Rhee government and “agitation” against the Soviet Union.

Kim Il Sung consulted Stalin in March and April 1950 concerning an invasion. Kim provided Stalin what turned out to be wildly exaggerated promises of the prospects of a North Korean military success, a spontaneous Communist revolution in the South, and American abstention from intervention. Certainly both Moscow and Beijing were actively involved in preparations for the invasion as early as the spring of 1949.7

When the war began in June 1950, the North had every military advantage. Its Korean People’s Army (KPA) numbered some 130,000 men with heavy artillery, 151 T-34 tanks, and about 180 aircraft, including fighters and twin-engine bombers. In the South, the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) was unprepared militarily because of U.S. unease about Syngman Rhee unleashing a war to reunify Korea but also because there were insufficient funds in a shrunken U.S. defense budget.8 In 1950, the U.S. military itself was stretched thin, relatively small, poorly trained, and inadequately equipped. The army numbered just nine divisions. ROK armed forces numbered about 95,000 men. No ROKA unit had progressed beyond regimental-level training, and the ROKA lacked heavy artillery, tanks, and even anti-tank weapons to include mines. Its sole aircraft were trainers and liaison types. Worse, ROKA ammunition stocks were sufficient for only six days of combat.9

Kim Il Sung fully expected to overrun South Korea quickly; indeed, the invasion plan called for this to be completed within 22–27 days. He also promised Soviet leader Josef Stalin a concurrent Communist revolution in the South, and he insisted that Washington would not intervene.10 Stalin himself concluded that, even if the United States did move to defend Korea it would come too late. Soviet military aid was substantial, and Soviet military personnel in North Korea took a key role in the planning of the invasion, to begin sometime between June 22 and 25, 1950.11

Stalin’s approval had been contingent on the support of Chinese leader Mao Zedong, and indeed the Soviet leader had insisted that Kim meet with Mao. Kim asked that Mao release the some 28,000 Koreans organized into the 154th, 164th, and 166th divisions of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to join the KPA. These divisions had fought against the Japanese in World War II and in the Chinese Civil War. At the end of 1949, Mao agreed to release half of the men, along with their weapons and equipment. They played a key role in the subsequent KPA invasion.12

The invasion caught both MacArthur and official Washington by surprise. Fighting along the border between North and South Korea had died down, and U.S. government officials did not think that the Communist camp would risk a nuclear war. Although Truman called it “the most difficult decision” of his presidency, U.S. intervention was certain, given the Truman Doctrine, domestic political fallout from the Communist victory in China in 1949, the growing menace of McCarthyism that
saw Communist plots everywhere, and the belief that a communist success in Korea would embolden the Communists elsewhere.13
Within hours of the June 25, 1950 invasion, the United Nations Security Council called for an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of the KPA. A Soviet boycott allowed action, and on June 27 the Security Council asked member states to furnish assistance to South Korea. President Truman extended U.S. air and naval operations to include North Korea, and he authorized U.S. forces to protect the vital port of Busan. Upon U.S. Far Eastern Command (FEC) commander General MacArthur’s recommendation, he committed FEC ground forces to the war on June 30. The United States then had four poorly trained and equipped divisions in Japan. By cannibalizing his 7th Infantry Division, MacArthur was able to dispatch the 24th and 25th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Cavalry Division to Korea within two weeks.14
Meanwhile, the war was going badly for the ROK. At the time of the invasion, four ROKA divisions were stretched out over more than 200 miles of linear front. (The remaining ROKA divisions were engaged in training and counter-guerrilla operations.) This was some 9.5 miles a regiment, far more than was possible to defend. There were few natural obstacles to impede the KPA, and the ROKA was also forced to defend the cul-de-sac of the Ongjin peninsula. Only a valiant effort by the ROKA 6th Division on the Chuncheon front allowed the remainder of the ROKA to regroup and erect the Han River defensive line, delaying the KPA offensive. Seoul fell on June 28. Then, in one of the key tactical blunders of the war, KPA troops halted to regroup for three days. They did not begin crossing the Han River until July 1.15 A mistaken decision by ROKA Chief of Staff Major General Chae Pyong Dok led to the four bridges over the Han being blown hours before this was necessary, cutting off thousands of troops and their heavy equipment from reaching the south.
On July 5 the first American ground forces unit—Task Force Smith of only 540 men—entered the war at Osan 50 miles south of Seoul. The false sense of optimism that the mere presence of American troops would give the North Koreans pause was quickly dispelled when the KPA easily brushed the poorly equipped Americans aside.16
At the request of the UN Security Council, the United Nations set up a military command in Korea. Washington insisted on a U.S. commander, and on July 10 Truman appointed MacArthur to head the United Nations Command (UNC). Sixteen nations contributed military assistance, and at peak strength UNC forces numbered about 400,000 ROK, 250,000 U.S., and 35,000 from other nations. The largest of these was the 1st Commonwealth Division from Britain and Canada, while Turkey provided a brigade. Other nations provided smaller numbers of military personnel or non-combat assistance in the form of medical units.
The Communist revolution, predicted by Kim Il Sung for the South, failed to materialize. Meanwhile, difficult terrain, primitive logistics, poor communication, and floods of refugees delayed the North Korean advance as much as did the defenders, but by mid-July UNC troops had been pushed back into the so-called Busan Perimeter, an area of 30–50 miles in southeastern Korea around Busan. In desperate fighting, ROK and U.S. forces held. This may be attributed to their artillery, U.S. Air Force control of the skies, and Eighth Army (EUSAK, Eighth U.S. Army in Korea) commander Lieutenant General Walton Walker’s brilliant improvised mobile defense. The KPA also had failed early to employ its manpower advantage and mount simultaneous attacks along the entire perimeter.17
Even as the battle for the Busan Perimeter raged, MacArthur was planning an amphibious assault behind enemy lines. Confident it could hold, MacArthur deliberately weakened EUSAK to build up an invasion force. He selected Incheon as the invasion site. Only 15 miles from Seoul, it was nearly astride the KPA’s main supply line south. The recapture of nearby Seoul would also deal North Korea a major political blow.  

A landing at Incheon was risky and almost everyone save MacArthur opposed it. Mines were stacked and waiting but, fortunately, had not been laid. Still, the problems were daunting. On September 15 Major General Edward Almond’s X Corps of the 1st Marine Division and the 7th Infantry Division commenced the invasion. Supported by naval gunfire and air attacks, the marines soon secured Incheon, and UNC forces reentered Seoul on September 24. EUSAK also broke out of the Busan Perimeter. Driving north, it linked up with X Corps on September 26. Only one-quarter to one-third of the KPA escaped into the North. During their retreat northward, the KPA took with them thousands of South Koreans and forced them to serve in their army.

By this time, there was enormous pressure in the United States on Truman to expand the war. Both Republicans and Democrats sought to defeat the communists, not merely to “contain” them; and MacArthur was himself perhaps the most outspoken proponent of changing the war aims to include total victory. Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and new Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall now decided to take the war into North Korea, which exceeded the UNC’s mission. On October 7, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for “a unified, independent, and democratic” Korea. The United States used this as justification to enter North Korea.

With Pyongyang having ignored MacArthur’s call for surrender, on October 1 ROKA troops crossed into North Korea. On October 9, MacArthur ordered U.S. forces to follow. The advance was rapid, and Pyongyang fell on October 19.

MacArthur now committed a major strategic blunder, retaining X Corps as a separate command under Almond and dividing his forces for the drive to the Yalu River. He ordered X Corps sent by sea to the east coast port of Wonsan with the task of clearing northeastern Korea, while EUSAK remained on the west coast to drive into northwest Korea. The two commands were now separated by a gap of between 20 and 50 miles. MacArthur believed, falsely as it turned out, that the Nangnim Mountain range would obviate large-scale Communist operations there.

All went well at first. The Eighth Army crossed the Chongchon River at Sinanju and by November 1, elements of the 24th Division were only 18 miles from the Yalu. Several days earlier a reconnaissance platoon of the ROK 6th Division reached the Yalu, the only UNC unit to get there.

China now entered the war, albeit unofficially through the guise of “volunteers.” Alarmed by a U.S. military presence adjacent to Manchuria, Mao had issued repeated warnings about potential Chinese military intervention. Actually, he was planning to intervene even before UNC troops crossed the 38th parallel, but on September 30 Kim requested intervention. Mao was confident. He believed that the United States would be unable to counter the Chinese numerical advantage and he viewed American troops as soft and unused to night time fighting.

On October 2 Mao informed Stalin that China would enter the war. Stalin agreed to shift Soviet MiG-15 fighters already in China to the Korean border to cover the
Chinese buildup and prevent U.S. air attacks on Manchuria. Soviet pilots began flying combat missions on November 1. Stalin ordered other Soviet air units to deploy to China, train Chinese pilots, and then turn over aircraft to them. Ultimately, there were some 26,000 Soviet military personnel involved. Soviet pilots bore the brunt of the air war. Although ordered to pretend they were Chinese, they soon dropped this pretense as impractical in combat.

Stalin had no intention of using Soviet air power for anything other than defensive purposes, but the Chinese later angrily claimed that Stalin had promised full air support for their ground forces. Still, Stalin had helped China establish the world’s third largest air force.19

On October 25 Chinese troops entered the fighting in northwestern Korea, and Walker wisely brought the bulk of EUSAK south of the Chongchon. The Chinese offensive then slackened. The Chinese also attacked in northeastern Korea before halting operations and breaking contact there as well. The initial Chinese incursion ended on November 7.

In a meeting with President Truman at Wake Island on October 15, MacArthur had assured the president that the war was all but won, but that if the Chinese intervened, their forces would be slaughtered by UNC air power. Yet from November 1, 1950 to October 1951, MiGs so dominated the Yalu River area that U.S. B-29 bombers had to cease daylight operations. It is hard to understand how MacArthur, who touted himself as an expert on Asia, could have so misread Chinese intentions and capabilities.

The initial Chinese intervention numbered 18 “volunteer” divisions. In early November, the Chinese moved an additional 12 into Korea, totaling some 300,000 men. MacArthur now ordered the destruction of the bridges over the Yalu. Washington revoked the order, but MacArthur complained of the threat to his command and Washington gave in. The bombing on November 8 had little effect, however; most of the Chinese were already in North Korea and the Yalu was soon frozen. Sheer manpower numbers would overcome Chinese logistical limitations.

Meanwhile, American leaders in Washington debated how to proceed. The political leadership and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) under chairman General Omar Bradley believed that Europe had to remain the top priority. Washington decided that while Manchuria would remain off-limits, MacArthur could take other military steps he deemed advisable, including resuming the offensive. The Democrats were especially reluctant to show lack of resolve in Korea, for the Republicans who blamed them for the “loss” of China had gained seats in the November 1950 congressional elections.

While much was made in the United States about the prohibitions of strikes on Manchuria, it should be pointed out that the Communist side also exercised restraint. With the exception of a few ancient biplanes that sporadically struck UNC positions at night, Communist air power was restricted to north of Pyongyang. No effort was made to strike Busan and UNC convoys traveled without fear of air attack, even at night with lights blazing. Nor did communist forces attempt to disrupt UNC sea communications.

MacArthur had made X Corps dependent logistically on EUSAK instead of Japan, and Walker insisted on delaying resumption of the offensive until he could build up sufficient supplies. Poor weather was also a problem, but Walker agreed to resume the offensive on November 24. To the east, X Corps was widely dispersed.
MacArthur was oblivious to any threat, confident this would be an occupation rather than an offensive. The offensive went well on the first day, but on the night of November 25–26 the Chinese struck Eighth Army in force. On November 26 the ROKA II Corps gave way under the massive Chinese assault, exposing EUSAK’s right flank. The Chinese poured 18 divisions into the gap, threatening the whole of Eighth Army. In a brilliant delaying action at Kunu-ri, the U.S. 2nd Division bought time for the other EUSAK divisions to get across the Chongchon. MacArthur now ordered a retirement just below the 38th Parallel to protect Seoul. 20

Washington directed MacArthur to pull X Corps out of northeastern Korea. Under heavy Chinese attack, X Corps withdrew to the coast for seaborne evacuation along with the ROK I Corps. The retreat of the 1st Marine Division and some army elements from the Changjin Reservoir ranks as one of the most masterly withdrawals in military history. X Corps was then redeployed to Busan by sea. At Hungnam through December 24, 105,000 officers and men were evacuated, along with some 91,000 Korean refugees who did not want to remain in the north.

The Korean War had entered a new phase; in effect the UNC was now fighting China. MacArthur refused to accept a limited war and publicized his views to his supporters, making reference to “inhibitions” placed upon him. UNC morale plummeted, especially with General Walker’s death in a jeep accident on December 22. Not until Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway arrived to replace Walker did the situation improve. In the United States, meanwhile, Truman found himself under heavy pressure from Republicans to pursue the war vigorously. But fearing a wider war, possibly even a world-wide conflagration involving the Soviet Union, the administration reduced its goal to restoring the status quo ante bellum.

UNC forces were again forced to retreat when the Chinese launched a New Year’s offensive, retaking Seoul on January 4, 1951. But the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (CPVA) soon outran its supply lines and Ridgway began a methodical, limited advance designed to inflict maximum punishment rather than secure territory. Ridgway rejected suggestions from several of his key subordinates for an amphibious landing that might have trapped large numbers of communist troops. Nonetheless, by the end of March, UNC forces had recaptured Seoul, and by the end of April they were north of the 38th Parallel.

On April 11, 1951 President Truman relieved MacArthur of command, appointing Ridgway in his stead. Lieutenant General James Van Fleet took over EUSAK. Truman and MacArthur saw the war quite differently. MacArthur saw the conflict as a great anti-communist crusade that would reverse the Chinese Revolution. This position elicited some support from among so-called “Asia Firsters” in the United States, notably members of the Republican Party, but it found little support in the United Nations or among Western European leaders. MacArthur made no secret of his desire to expand the war and had made his case for this publicly. MacArthur wanted to bomb Manchuria, employ Chinese Nationalist troops in Korea, and unleash the Nationalist forces on Taiwan against the Chinese mainland.

Although widely unpopular at the time, MacArthur’s removal was fully supported by the JCS. The general returned home to a hero’s welcome. But political support soon faded as did MacArthur’s hopes, however faint, of a run for president in 1952. 21

On April 22, the Chinese counterattacked. Rather than expend his troops in a defensive stand, Van Fleet ordered a methodical withdrawal, employing artillery firepower and air strikes against the Communist forces. The Chinese pushed the
UNC south of the 38th Parallel, but the offensive was halted by May 19. UNC forces then counter-punched and by the end of May the front stabilized just above the 38th Parallel. The JCS now generally limited EUSAK to that line, allowing only small local advances to secure more favorable terrain.

The war now became one of position, essentially a stalemate. In these circumstances, a diplomatic settlement seemed expedient. On June 23, 1951 Soviet UN representative Jacob Malik proposed a cease-fire. With the Chinese expressing interest, Truman authorized Ridgway to open negotiations. Meetings began on July 10 at Kaesong, although hostilities continued.

UNC operations from this point were essentially designed to minimize friendly casualties. Both sides had now built deep defensive lines that would be costly to break through. In August, armistice talks broke down and later that month the Battle of Bloody Ridge began, developing into the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge, which lasted until mid-October. In late October negotiations resumed, this time at Panmunjeom. The fighting continued, with half of the war’s casualties occurring during the period of armistice negotiations.

On November 12, 1951 Ridgway ordered Van Fleet to cease offensive operations. Fighting now devolved into raids, local attacks, patrols, and artillery fire. In February 1953 Lieutenant General Maxwell D. Taylor took command of EUSAK. UNC air operations intensified to choke off Communist supply lines and reduce the likelihood of offensive action. By now also, the burden was shifting to the ROKA, which was adding one new, trained division each month and was inflicting more than half of the casualties on KPA and Chinese units.

In the United States, meanwhile, Truman’s popularity had plummeted because of the war and wartime controls on the economy, and he refused to stand for reelection. In November 1952 General Dwight Eisenhower was elected president on a mandate to end the war. With U.S. casualties running at 2,500 a month, the conflict had become a political liability. Eisenhower instructed the JCS to draw up plans to end the war militarily, including the possible use of nuclear weapons. Talk of this was allowed to circulate publicly. More important in ending the conflict, however, was Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953.

As the armistice negotiations entered their final phase in May, the Chinese stepped up military action, initiating attacks in June and July to remove bulges in the line. UNC forces gave up some ground, but inflicted heavy casualties.

Prisoner repatriation remained the chief obstacle to an agreement and the use of prisoners as propaganda tools was the main reason the war continued. The North Koreans and Chinese had forced into their army many South Koreans, and thousands of them had subsequently been taken prisoner. If all KPA prisoners were repatriated, many South Koreans would be sent to North Korea. Also, many Chinese POWs did not wish to return to China but sought refuge on Taiwan. Truman, who had seen the consequences of the forced repatriation of Russian citizens from western Europe after World War II, was determined that none would be repatriated against their will. The Communist side rejected the UNC position out of hand and sought to use the prisoners to tar the United Nations Command with the patent lie of germ warfare and immoral air operations against North Vietnam.

Following intense UNC air strikes on North Korean hydroelectric facilities and the capital of Pyongyang, the Communists accepted a face-saving formula whereby a neutral commission would handle prisoner repatriation. Syngman Rhee, who was
adamantly opposed to any peace settlement that did not include the reunification of
the two Koreas, almost sabotaged the peace agreement with the release of some
27,000 North Korean prisoners just weeks before the final agreement. Rhee was only
placated by Washington’s pledge of military and financial aid, in the U.S.–ROK
Mutual Defense Treaty of August 1953. (Had Rhee not agreed to honor the
armistice, the Eisenhower administration might have been forced to implement
Operation EVERYREADY, its secret but risky plan to remove him from office.)
Finally, on July 27 an armistice was signed at Panmunjeom, and the guns fell silent.²⁴

Of the 132,000 North Korean and Chinese military POWs, fewer than 90,000
chose to return home. Twenty-two Americans held by the Communists also elected
not to return home, which came as a shock to the American public. Of 10,218
Americans captured by the Communists, only 3,746 returned; the remaining 6,472
perished. Perhaps four times that number of South Korean prisoners also died. ROK
forces sustained some 257,000 military deaths, while U.S. war-related deaths
numbered 36,574. Other UNC killed came to 3,960. North Korea has released no
casualty figures, but its military deaths are estimated at 295,000. Chinese deaths from
all causes might approach 1 million. Perhaps 900,000 South Korean civilians died
during the war from all causes.²⁵

The war absolutely devastated Korea and hardened the divisions between North
and South. Democracy was also a casualty, for the corrupt Rhee regime rode
roughshod over its opposition and assumed virtual dictatorial powers by 1953. The
war was also a sobering experience for the United States, accustomed to total victory.
But after the war, the U.S. military establishment remained strong. The Korean War
had institutionalized the Cold War national security state. The Korean War also
effectively militarized U.S. foreign policy. Before the war, Marshall Plan aid had been
almost entirely non-military. Aid now shifted heavily toward military rearmament.
The Korean War also solidified the role of the United States as the ‘‘world’s
policeman’’ and strengthened the country’s relationship with its western European
allies and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It greatly facilitated the
rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), and it
dramatically impacted the Japanese economy. At the same time it also brought
direct military American assistance to the French fighting in Indo-China, placing the
United States on the slippery slope to the Vietnam War.

The war had important consequences for America domestically. It ended 20 years
of control by the Democratic Party, and the racial integration of the armed forces
carried out during the war provided a powerful impetus for the U.S. Civil Rights
Movement, which began in earnest in the late 1950s. It accelerated an economic and
political reorientation from the North and Northeast to the South, Southwest, and
West. The war also brought huge increases in the defense budget and it saw a
considerable expansion in presidential powers.

China gained greatly from the war, which added immensely to its prestige. China
now came to be regarded as the preponderant military power in Asia. In the
following decades concerns over Chinese military strength was woven into the fabric
of American foreign policy. This influenced subsequent U.S. policy in Vietnam. No
formal peace has been concluded in Korea. Technically the two Koreas remain at
war. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the Northern Limitation Line (NLL) in the
Yellow Sea, constitute one of the world’s flashpoints.
Although the war ended nearly six decades ago, we still have much to learn about it, especially regarding Chinese and Soviet participation. Beginning two decades ago, documents from the Chinese and Russian archives produced major revelations, but only a fraction of these have been released. Chinese strength and casualty figures remain largely guesswork. Also, the period of stalemate from January 1951 to July 1953 has not received the attention of the first, maneuver phase. New studies can also be written on the roles of air and naval power. Atrocities committed by both sides in the war continue to be the subject of investigation and debate, and further study of the abduction of South Koreans by North Korea and reasons prompting the armistice talks and the negotiations themselves would be helpful. Sorely needed also, is a more complete study of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) and the training of the ROKA and how this was accomplished so effectively in the middle of a war, in sharp contrast to the situations facing the United States in Vietnam as well as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Notes
10. See Dae-Sook Suh, Kim Il Sung.

Notes on contributor
Spencer C. Tucker (Ph.D., University of North Carolina, 1966) served two years on active duty as a captain in army intelligence, then lectured for 36 years (30 at Texas Christian University, the last five years as chair of the History Department[0]; and six as the holder of the John Biggs Chair of Military History at his alma mater, the Virginia Military Institute). He continues to write. Dr. Tucker is the author or editor of 37 books and encyclopedias treating military and naval history. Among his awards are the Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt Prize for the best book in naval history in 2003 for his biography of Stephen Decatur and two best reference book awards from the Society of Military History. His most recent works, all published in 2010, are *The Korean War: An Encyclopedia* (editor, 3 vols.), *The United States in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq Wars: An Encyclopedia* (editor, 5 vols.); and *Battles that Changed History: An Encyclopedia of World Conflict*. 
North Korea is marking the anniversary with a series of performances, festivals, and cultural events this week, culminating with a large military parade on 27 July. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un salutes as honour guards march past at a commemoration event at the cemeteries of fallen fighters of the Korean People’s Army. Photograph: Jason Lee/Reuters. Soldiers of the North Korean honour guard lift their flags at the opening ceremony for a cemetery for Korean war veterans. Photograph: David Guttenfelder/AP.