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THE POLICY-WAR NEXUS: THE CASE OF KOREA, TRUMAN, AND MACARTHUR

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**THE POLICY-WAR NEXUS:
THE CASE OF KOREA, TRUMAN, AND MACARTHUR**

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INTRODUCTION

The Korean War is also informally called the “forgotten war” for the rather minor attention it got in the media if compared to Vietnam or the Second World War. However, it was undoubtedly a crucial point in history, it was the first “hot” conflict of the Cold War, as it showcased an embryonal transition from World War Two practices, thoughts, and strategies into the limited conflicts and proxy wars that would characterize the Cold War. Before detailing my research question, I will examine the events of the conflict and establish a coherent timeline.

After the Second World War, the Japanese colony of Korea was divided into the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south. The northern region adopted a communist regime under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung, heavily supported by the Soviet Union, while the south established an authoritarian anti-communist regime led by Syngman Rhee.¹

In early 1949, North Korea began a significant build-up of its armed forces, the Korean People’s Army (KPA), modeled after the Soviet Army and equipped with Soviet weaponry. By surpassing the capabilities of the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) in a year, the KPA prepared to launch a southward offensive to reunify the country.

On June 25, 1950, the KPA initiated its invasion south of the 38th parallel, swiftly capturing Seoul and routing the ROKA.² Consequently, United States President Harry Truman secured UN approval for the intervention. General MacArthur, overseeing US forces in the Pacific, and at the time head of the Far East Command (FECOM) based in Tokyo, was tasked with assisting the ROK in repelling the invasion.

The conflict unfolded through significant developments, including MacArthur's successful landing at Inchon with the subsequent recapture of Seoul and the liberation of South Korea.³ Having practically destroyed the KPA, General MacArthur decided at this point to try to capture the whole peninsula in order to reunify it under a US-friendly government. His northbound march arrived at the Korea-China border situated along the Yalu River. However, this prompted the intervention of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA), sent by Communist China Chairman Mao. The war developed through a series of subsequent offensives and counteroffensives, the PVA managed to recapture Pyongyang (the Northern capital) and even Seoul, until a UN counteroffensive liberated the city again. These events culminated in a stalemate along the 38th parallel, ironically not dissimilar from the *status quo ante bellum*. The situation of equilibrium lasted until the signing of the armistice in 1953, establishing a demilitarized zone. Until the armistice, the Korean War was fundamentally a war of movement in which both sides captured and subsequently lost almost all of Korea. Ultimately, the two armies reached a point of equilibrium in which no one had the power to make any more gains, ending the War with a stalemate.

It is still debated if this war can be considered a US defeat. However, how a superpower such as the US was forced into a military stalemate by a combined Chinese-Korean Army still fascinates many

¹ Millett, Allan Reed. *The War for Korea, 1945-1950 : a House Burning*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, (2005). P. 159-162

² Appleman, Roy E. *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (June-November 1950)*, Center of Military History United States Army, Washington D.C. (1992), p. 21-26

³ Appleman, Chapter XXV

scholars. Out of all the military and political aspects that have been analyzed over the years I want to explore one of the earliest: the claim that the Korean War was “lost” due to Truman's leadership and the decisions he made before and during the war. In the following chapter I am going to expand on what I mean by saying “lost” and explain my research design.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Academic literature on the Korean War is divided into two broad camps: political and military. The former concerns the Truman presidency, the US political climate and the political implications of the war. Researchers like Beisner, Pierpaoli, and Blomstedt wrote extensively about Truman and his conflicts with Congress, also in regard to the Korean War, but did not develop what the decisions taken in Washington meant for the effective course of the conflict.⁴ The latter instead focuses very specifically on the war itself. It is either composed of broad historiographies of the conflict⁵ or treaties and monographies analyzing very specific topics, such as logistics⁶ or intelligence⁷.

This thesis aims at bridging these two aspects, helping us better understand the impact Truman and his framing of the Korean War had on its unfolding and if a different outcome could have been reached through different decisions, leading to a unified Korea. This means that I am not discussing the unfolding of the Korean War or the reasoning behind Truman's decisions. I am going to touch on both subjects, but these are not the aims of this thesis. I am assessing the impact of political decision-making on the unfolding of the war. Why those decisions were taken, while a surely interesting question, is a matter for those research projects that focus on the Truman presidency and the geopolitical situation of the early Cold War like the ones I have previously mentioned.

To sum up we encounter a gap in the literature in which the analysis of the factors leading to the military stalemate are drawn from military historiography and at the same time fundamentally develop a critique of Truman policies which inevitably fall on the political sphere. At the same time political treaties analyze the reasoning behind those choices but not to what extent those are true. Let's see a couple of examples: Zimmerman and Correa research UN logistical problems created by geography and the 1950s US army structure; they pan out a critical situation in which the UN logistical capabilities are in a severe situation. If that's true, however, how could a general escalation of the UN army number in Korea tip the balance of the war? Wouldn't it be even more of an issue for an overburdened logistical corps? It seems odd to believe that the UN army faced great logistical issues and at the same time believing that Truman's refusal to pour half a million men into the scenario would have made the US win the war. Another example is intelligence, MacArthur and the military of that time believed that failing to predict Communist China's intervention was a failure imputable

⁴ Examples include: Millett, *ibidem*

Beisner, Rober L. Dean Acheson, A life in the Cold War, Oxford University Press (2006),

Bernstein, Barton J. "The Truman Administration and the Korean War." In *The Truman Presidency*, 410–44, (1989).

Blomstedt, Larry. *Truman, Congress, and Korea*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016

⁵Like: Appleman *ibidem*

Roe, Patrick C. *The Dragon Strikes: China and the Korean War, June-December 1950*. Novato, CA: Presidio, 2000,

Lee, Steven Hugh. *The Korean War*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Kaufman, Burton I. (1999) *The Korean conflict*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

⁶ Zimmerman, Leroy *Korean War logistics eight United States Army US Army War College Carlisle Barracks, PA (1986)*, Crocker, Harry Martin, "Chinese intervention in the Korean War" (2002). LSU Master's Theses

⁷ Haynes, Justin M. *Intelligence failure in Korea: Major General's Charles A. Willoughby's role in the United Nations Command's defeat in November 1950, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2009*

Correa, Edward L. JR: *Logistics and the Chinese Communist intervention during the Korean Conflict (1950-1953)*, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, (1986)

Knight, Peter G. *MacArthur's Eyes: reassessing military intelligence operations in the forgotten war, June 1950-april 1951*, The Ohio State University, 2006

Azotea, Charles M. *operational intelligence failures of the Korean War: A Monograph School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 2014-01*

to domestic agency. After all, it is the role of the Secretary of State to predict foreign policy involvement. On the other hand, there is plenty of literature about intelligence gathering of the FECOM and how they failed to predict a Chinese intervention⁸. Again, the tension between domestic/political and local/military factors is present in the two narratives. In many ways the PVA surprise attack on the 8th US Army was a pivotal moment in the war, failing to predict that had huge repercussions.⁹ However, addressing those issues without looking at the presidency lacks nuance since the political and military aspects of war are intrinsically connected. This is the aim of my thesis. While all works that I have just cited contain an element of each strand of scholarship, none explicitly highlights the intrinsic and strong connection between the two. hence, I believe that my question: “*To what extent the claim that the Korean War was “lost” due to Truman's leadership is true?*” covers a little, but important, void in academia.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

But what do I mean by “*Lost*”? Before dwelling on how I framed my research question it is necessary to talk about my methodology.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative research method, in particular Content Analysis and Historical Analysis. My thesis has three main sources of information: secondary sources regarding Truman, secondary sources regarding the War and databases of primary sources such as documents and reports. My thesis wants to bridge the first two areas of academic research using primary sources.

I used Historiographical Analysis to review the existing literature: books, articles, and monographs, that discussed either Truman's foreign policy or the Korean War. I focused on Truman’s detractors since they would highlight areas in which they believed Truman had a certain impact. Through this review I identified two common trends running along the debate on Truman’s responsibilities for the War: Commitment and Intelligence, which are going to be the two main chapters of this thesis.

Commitment regards all that Truman could have done but did not according to its critics, such as: employing the Republic of China (ROC) armed forces in Korea, escalating the number of US soldiers, and allowing for Chinese territory to be bombed/flown over by US planes. Intelligence instead refers to a more specific debate: who is responsible for failing to predict the People’s Volunteer Army (Communist China expeditionary force, PVA) entry into the war which had a huge impact, as I am going to expand in the appropriate chapter.

Content Analysis was used to extrapolate data from my primary sources. I collected a substantial amount of primary source materials, which could include official documents, letters, speeches, news articles, and military reports. These sources offer a diverse range of perspectives and information about the Truman administration's decisions and actions during the Korean War. I systematically reviewed them identifying specific elements regarding Truman’s decisions and military strategies during the war. Then I categorized them into the two main macro topics: “commitment” and “intelligence”, using the insights gained from them to effectively evaluate the criticisms moved to Truman identified in the secondary sources through Historiographical Analysis.

⁸ Crocker, *ibidem*, Knight, *ibidem*, Haynes, *ibidem*

⁹ Azotea, p.35

Among Truman's critics, General Douglas MacArthur¹⁰ takes the spotlight, head of the FECOM and of the UN forces in Korea until 1951. In a later interview with the New York Times,¹¹ the General criticized Truman for his lack of commitment to the Korean War. His criticisms¹² are the starting point for this thesis since they provide us with a good reference point to test Truman's impact on the conflict. Consequently, the word "lost" in my research question refers to MacArthur's point of view. So "losing the war" means gridlocking into a stalemate and not liberating all of Korea (and maybe China if we follow the old General's wishes). However, even before entering the merit of my research design, it is worth noting that the stalemate might very well be considered a victory for the US. In fact, many National Security Reports from the time indicate that the main objectives of the US in Asia were to buy time to complete the mobilization effort, localize the conflict, fight in Korea until there was no risk of destruction of the UN forces etc.¹³ The objective to capture North Korea arose after the battle of Inchon and the destruction of the KPA where the full occupation of North Korea seemed possible but, while real, it was a glimpse in an overall more prudent spectrum of objectives or it appeared as a possibility, secondary to the avoidance of a general land war in Asia¹⁴¹⁵ or to keep Europe friendly.¹⁶ The concepts of victory and defeat are "constructed" in a way, meaning that they depend on the observer. surely what they meant for MacArthur and Truman was different. Nonetheless, we know from Acheson's¹⁷ memories that after the Inchon landing, there was a desire, even on the politician's part, to reunify Korea.¹⁸ This meant that, at least partially, they believed it was possible and thus worth investigating.

Theoretical Framework

All of my thesis draws from the assumption that the political and military spheres are intrinsically connected. This claim is based on Clausewitz's thought and conceptualization of war. Clausewitz insists on linking the political sphere to the military, highlighting the fact that they are intrinsically connected.¹⁹ In fact, Clausewitz asserts that war is a continuation of politics, and it is always subservient to political objectives.²⁰ The ultimate purpose of war is to achieve political goals and advance the interests of the state. The nature and conduct of war are influenced by the political aims and objectives pursued by the state. These objectives dictate the strategy, scope, and intensity of military operations. So, war is intrinsically going to be shaped by the political line of thinking behind it, however that is just a part, or rather the beginning. War is a chaotic endeavor, while politics certainly influence and shape it, other factors contribute to its final unfolding. Clausewitz acknowledges that war is inherently unpredictable and chaotic. It is shaped by various factors, including the enemy's actions and reactions, chance events, and the involvement of multiple actors on the battlefield. Despite careful planning and political intentions, Clausewitz acknowledges that

¹⁰ For general information on MacArthur I consulted: Wittner, Lawrence Stephen. MacArthur. Englewood Cliffs, NJ [etc.]: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

¹¹ Considine Interview NYT April 9, 1964, p.16

¹² Also presenta t the time during his speech to congress: Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur's Address to Congress, April 19, 1951

¹³ Harry S. Truman to Douglas MacArthur, January 13, 1951 and Courses of Action Relative to Communist China and Korea, National Security Council Report 101, January 12, 1951 I

¹⁴ National Security Council Report 81, "United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea", September 1, 1950

¹⁵ REPORT, NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL POLICY ON KOREA, NOVEMBER 6 1950

¹⁶ Beisner, p 152-154, Pierpaoli, 57-58

¹⁷ Truman's secretary of state

¹⁸ Beisner, p. 394-404

¹⁹ Clausewitz, Carl Von „On War“ Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, abridged by Beatrice Heuser, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007 p.29-30

²⁰ Clausewitz, p.20-21

leaders cannot fully control the course and outcome of war, but they can certainly greatly influence it, while acknowledging that uncertainty and friction in war often lead to unexpected developments.²¹

This thesis draws from Clausewitz by both helping us better understand how Truman's framing of the US geopolitical position influenced the war (like placing Korea outside of the US defense perimeter as we are going to see further into the thesis) and by highlighting the peculiar problems of the Korean War itself that could not be solved through political actions.

Furthermore, it helps explain why there are often diverging views between the military and civilian branches during an armed conflict. The military is viewing the war only through strictly strategic objectives while the politicians should be looking at the bigger picture, at what political advantage could be achieved through the instrument of war. Here is what is peculiar about MacArthur's critique of Truman and in a sense the essence of the thesis. MacArthur criticizes Truman accusing him of purportedly not investing in the war (because of fear or even Isolationism) and for having the wrong POLITICAL, other than military, priorities. His critique is directed at the political actions rather than the military handling of the conflict.

Secondly, I frame my research through decision-making theory. Decision-making theory explores how policymakers make choices based on rational calculations, domestic pressures, and the information available to them. Examining the decisions made by key political figures during the Korean War, such as President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur, could shed light on how their actions impacted the war's outcome.

Decision-making theory is useful because what I am analyzing is at the core Key Decision Points, for example, how Korean rearmament was decided or why ROC troops were not committed. I am not discussing Decision Factors in depth since what I am interested in is not *Why* a decision was taken but rather its overall impact. This thesis aims primarily at analyzing decision outcomes and alternate courses of action. Whether Truman and his advisors explored different options and what would have been the consequences. This is particularly important when addressing critiques since it involves creating a hypothetical scenario.

LIMITATIONS

A great number of sources regarding the deployment of the Republic of China army are in Chinese. I used various online tools to translate them mainly relying on the new text IA technology. I translated them through at least two different engines to avoid gross translating mistakes, however, they are not as reliable as a human translation. Nonetheless, since most of the said sources are telegrams from which I wanted to extract mainly raw data, I included them anyway. Since I could not get the nuance of what is said there, I am not going to analyze many details from them, I am just using the raw information provided by the translation.

²¹ Clausewitz, p. 25-27

COMMITMENT

Let's now analyze what points were raised against Truman in terms of investment or better *commitment* to the Korean cause.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the main point that was raised against Truman is about commitment. He is accused of not "escalating" the war effort by taking, or refusing to take, some key decisions. The first one of those is the employment of ROC soldiers. In an interview for the NYT later in life General MacArthur asserted that he "would have called upon 500,000 of Chiang Kai-Shek's troops, sweetened by two United States Marine divisions to perform two naval landings, these should then join in a couple of days and form a united front alongside North Korea's border."²² Truman never approved the sending of ROC forces into Korea, hence the General critiques.

Starting from the interview, this chapter is going to develop problems and responsibilities associated with escalating the Korean War. Firstly, I am analyzing the effective usefulness of more troops, either the ROC army or American Marines in terms of value added to the battlefield. In the second part of this chapter I will instead talk about pre-war commitment and how the Truman administration could have influenced the war before it had even started.

War Escalation

The first point I want to raise regarding this issue is a discrepancy I found between the Considine interview and the other sources I have consulted. In the former, as we have seen, it is clear that MacArthur argues about using said ROC soldiers in Korea. However, in his Address to Congress in 1951 he clearly states instead that those troops should have been used in China, in an escalation of the war which would have seen fighting not just in Korea.²³ As we can clearly see these two scenarios are radically different, The political cost implied in utilizing these troops in Korea, while still high since it's a direct expansion of the actors involved in the war, is not nearly as high as a general war with China. Furthermore, some months prior a member of Congress, Martin, also blamed the state department of incompetence for "blocking the use of" 800000 anti-communist Chinese troops on Formosa."²⁴ Also the National Security Reports seem to have contrasting opinions over ROC troops and generally suggest using them while also advising against an open war with China. However, I could not find an official report about their use in the Korean contest. On the other hand, we have a few documents from the correspondence of the ROC embassy in the US that discuss sending Chinese soldiers to Korea.²⁵ In another document, we find that the discussion was going on even though no decision was reached.²⁶ As we see however both these documents are from late 1952, before the armistice of 1953 but well after the already stabilized stalemate on the 38th parallel that settled down in late 1951. Furthermore, both these documents have been produced during Eisenhower's presidency and are therefore not relevant to my research. Many documents produced during Truman's tenure by the Chinese embassy does not take into consideration sending troops to Korea but only to mainland China to expand the war.²⁷

²² Considine Interview NYT April 9 1964 p.16

²³ Transcript of General Douglas MacArthur; Address to Congress, April 19, 1951

²⁴ Harry S. Truman to Omar Bradley, with attachments, April 7, 1951

²⁵ "Telegram, Taipei to Foreign Minister Yeh", December 17, 1952, Wilson Center Digital Archive, China to Dispatch Troops to Aid Korea B.44.2b, Box 147, V.K. Wellington Koo Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²⁶ "Telegram, Taipei Secretary General Wang to the Chinese Embassy in the US", December 9, 1952, Wilson Center Digital Archive, China to Dispatch Troops to Aid Korea 6

²⁷ For further reference check the Wellington Koo papers here: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/topics/korean-war-1950-1953>

So, it is not even clear to what extent the utilization of ROC was on the table, it appears that before 1952 it was not discussed in the Korean environment, if not by MacArthur and by congressmen Martin and Taft²⁸ and other political actors.²⁹ however not in the contest of Korea. In fact, our sources point to the fact that ROC troops were to be deployed in China in the case of an all-out war, an option that was overall unfavored by the NSC reports and advice.

Nevertheless, we must take into consideration the possibility that I could not find them or that I have no access to them. So, let's assume for a moment that the proposal of sending nationalist Chinese soldiers to Korea was taken into consideration.

Even if that's the case I am arguing that they would not have tipped the balance of the war in any meaningful way. Firstly, their combat readiness was questionable. A declassified study dated 14 March 1951 states that "The Chinese Nationalist ground forces are incapable of withstanding a prolonged and determined all-out assault by Chinese Communist forces"³⁰, the ROC army equipment was heterogeneous, non-standardized, poorly maintained and overall scarce. Infantry divisions lacked organic artillery, there were insufficient amounts of automatic weapons and no anti-tank weapons.³¹ They have a very good defensive position, suffer from a poor command structure and lack of interservice coordination shortages of material, lackluster morale, and no reserve manpower. Even ROC documents question the readiness of their forces. In a letter to Foreign Minister Yeh secretary-general Wang asserts that the ROC army is not ready to be deployed either in China or Korea.³² It states that they are not ready militarily and that only 70 percent of the promised U.S. military aid for 1951, 30 percent of that for 1953, and none of that for the current year (1952) has arrived³³, meaning that well into the Korean War (and arguably already after the stalemate) the ROC was not yet fully equipped and ready. Their lack of preparation may be pinpointed to Truman and the US, but the ROC, as we have seen from the previous report, was in a terrible situation to begin with and so their usefulness to the military machine is at least questionable.

In conclusion, their questionable military readiness, vastly inferior vis a vis the PVA troops in Korea, would have prevented them from effectively being a strong force in the UN army arsenal. They may have had more success by performing their original intended purpose of participating in a general effort against China, but that's totally rooted in theory.

Logistics, or why more guns do not equate to more power.

My second argument regards the escalation of UN army numbers in Korea in general, including, but not limited to, the ROC army. I believe that the US army in Korea, due to geographical, infrastructural, and organizational issues, had already reached its maximum logistical capacity and deploying as many troops as MacArthur suggested would have been a logistical impossibility. So, Truman's decision of not escalating the war effort had a much smaller impact on the military equilibrium that appeared in 1951, contrary to his detractors.

²⁸ "Telegram, Ambassador Wellington Koo to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs", February 15, 1952, Wilson Center Digital Archive,

And: "Telegram, Ambassador Wellington Koo to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs", February 13, 1952, Wilson Center Digital Archive,

²⁹ Blomstedt, p.118-119

³⁰ Study, Courses of Action Relative to Communist China and Korea -- Anti-Communist Chinese, March 14, 1951, P.6 1

³¹ Study, Courses of Action Relative to Communist China and Korea, ibidem

³² Telegram, Taipei to Foreign Minister Yeh", December 17, 1952, Wilson Center Digital Archive, China to Dispatch Troops to Aid Korea B.44.2b, Box 147, V.K. Wellington Koo Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

³³ Telegram, Taipei to Foreign Minister Yeh, Ibidem

First of all, we should define logistics and the concepts I am using. I am utilizing Ryan T. Baker's definition of logistics, since it's the most exhaustive and clear. Baker defines Logistical Capacity as "the maximum quantity of supplies that a logistical force can transfer over a given distance per day"³⁴. Fundamental points in his research are the concepts of "tooth" and "tail" or so to speak "whether a military force has enough combat power (or "tooth") to overcome its enemy on the battlefield, but also on whether that force has enough logistical capacity (or "tail") to reach and hold its objectives"³⁵. Additionally, he defines territorial control as the ability of friendly forces to move freely while denying access to hostile forces.

Since military operations unfold over an extended period, even successful ones lasting weeks or months, most modern armies divide their forces into a combat force responsible for fighting and controlling territory (referred to as "the tooth") and a support force tasked with sustaining the combat force over time and space (referred to as "the tail"). The amount of tooth and tail required to achieve territorial objectives depends on several factors: (1) the distance to the objectives, (2) the resource consumption rate of the combat force, and (3) the relative speed of movement between the combat force and support force.³⁶

Distance is a key factor affecting logistical capacity. When breaking through enemy lines, the supply needs are relatively lower compared to when the objectives are located further away. As the advancing force moves forward, new fuel farms, ammunition dumps, transportation infrastructure like bridges and causeways need to be constructed behind them. As the defender gradually retreats towards their secondary and tertiary fortifications, the distance between the front line and the defender's supply depots decreases. The shape of the logistical capacity curve in relation to distance is crucial. It is intuitive that reducing the distance between the front and rear areas allows supply vehicles to make more round trips per day. However, the mathematical relationship reveals that logistical capacity increases asymptotically as the distance between the front and rear areas approaches zero. This non-linear relationship highlights the significant impact of the objective's distance from the line of departure.³⁷

So, to summarize, if the tooth advances rapidly it is more likely to reach its goals before the defender can react, however the deeper and faster he goes, the harder it is for the tail to keep the pace.

If we consider that logistical capacity is a necessary condition for achieving territorial control, as Baker does, it follows that (1) every instance of successful territorial control must be preceded by adequate logistical capacity, and (2) no military force can surpass the boundary set by its logistical capacity.

Now that we have defined logistics, let's see what the problems are with the claim that the withholding of troops (either Chinese or American) by Truman was not so crucial.

The *Tail*, as we have seen, is fundamental for projecting control over a territory and keeping the frontline units combat effective. In other words, it determines the maximum amount of troops you can deploy in a particular scenario to keep the force as combat-effective as possible. I believe that there were factors that greatly hampered the UN's logistical capacity in Korea which were not possible to surmount in 1951.

³⁴ Baker, Ryan T. *Logistics and Military Power: Tooth, Tail, and Territory in Conventional Military Conflict*

³⁵ Baker, p ix

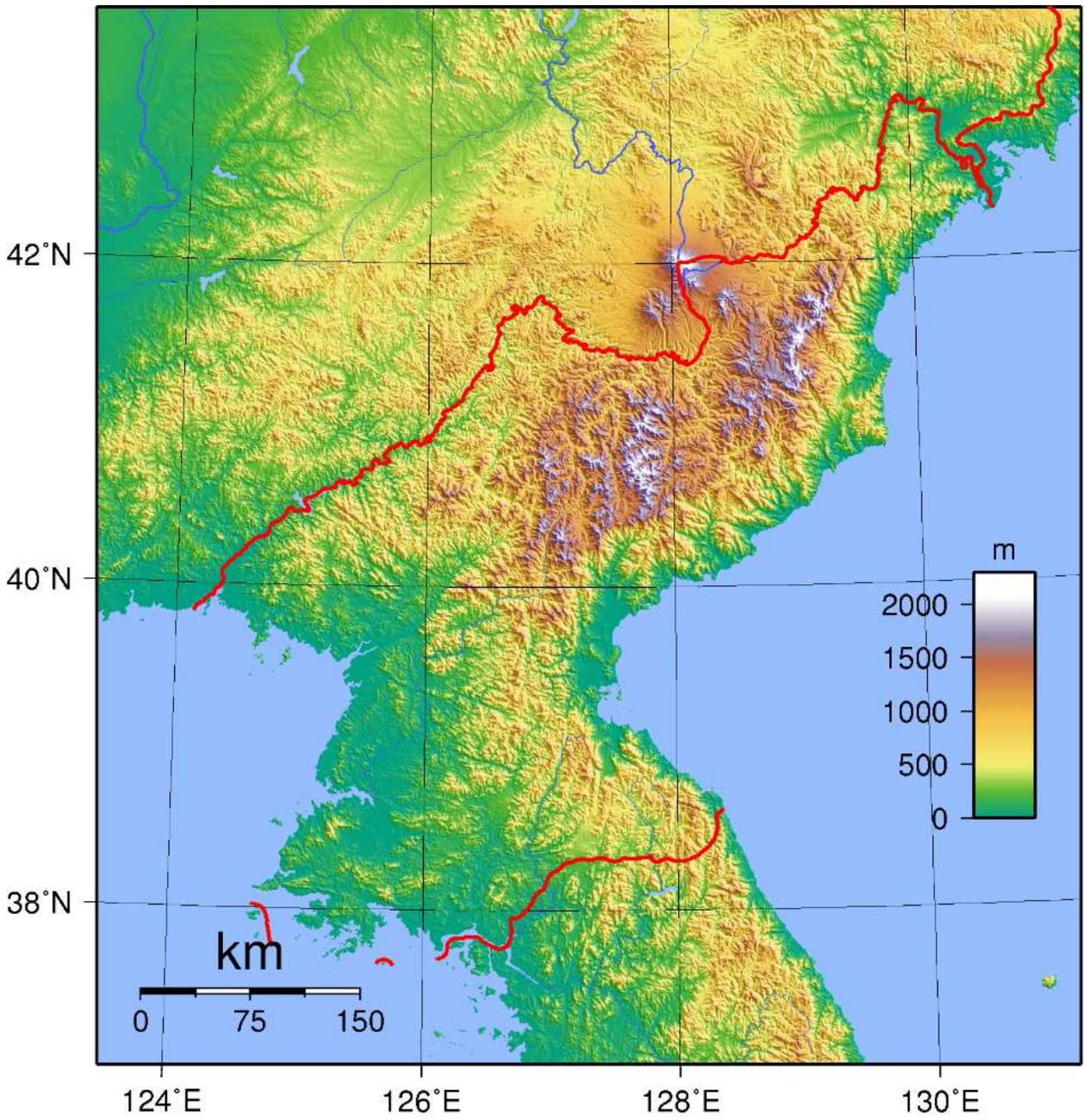
³⁶ Baker, p 7

³⁷ Baker, 50-52

I will start by discussing geography, specifically Korean topography, which presented very difficult challenges to the UN Army logistical corps.

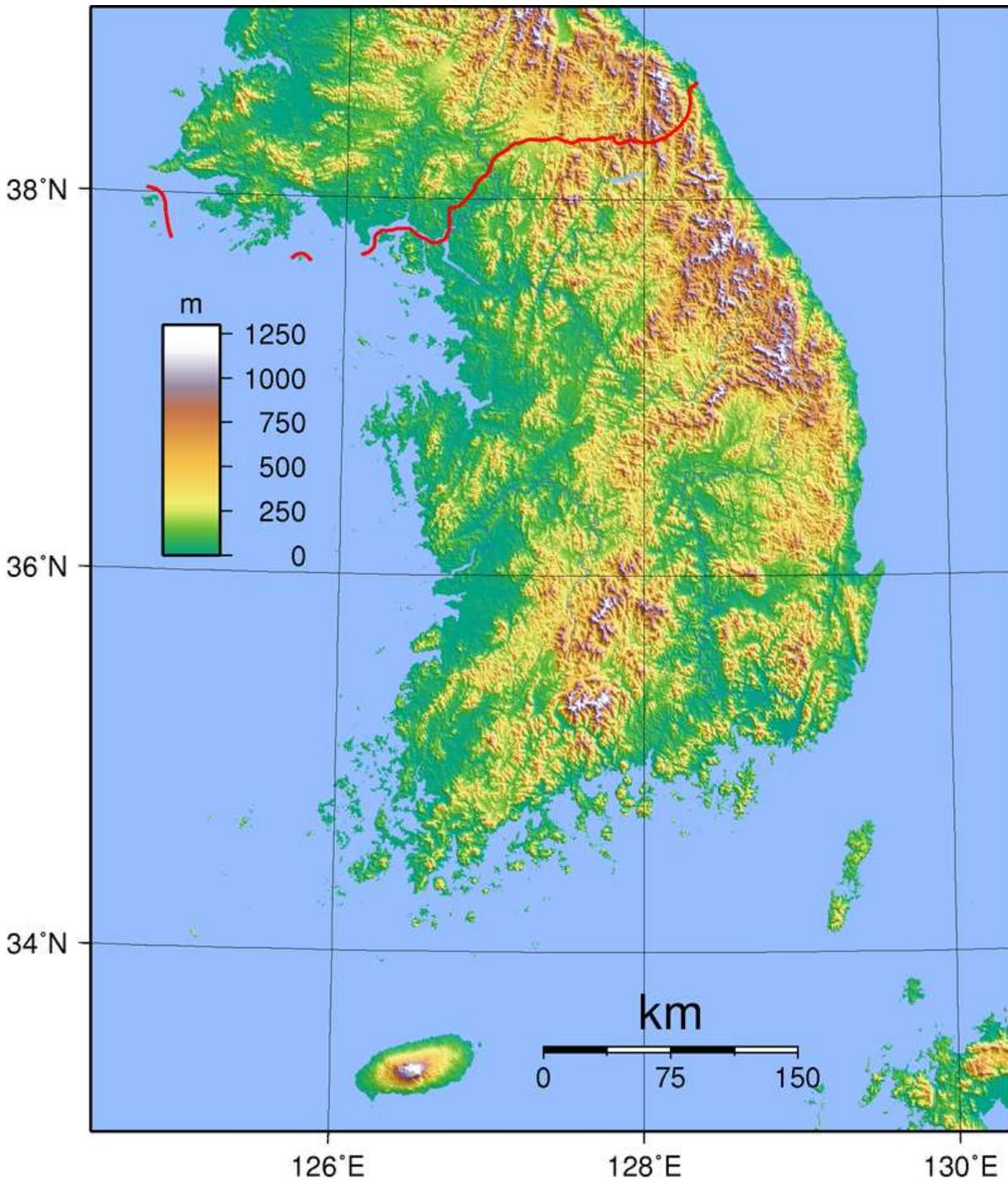
The Korean Peninsula is in East Asia, it is predominantly mountainous, with several mountain ranges running across its length. The most notable range is the Taebaek Mountains, which extend from the northeast to the southeast. The Taebaek Mountain range runs through the peninsula from North to South, especially along the eastern coastline. Extensive coastal plains are present along the western and southern coasts. These are the most fertile parts of the country, it's where the ROK capital Seoul is located and where most of the major rivers flow, like the Han and the Nakdong (Figure 2). The eastern part of the country is covered by highlands and cliffs. In the northwest of the peninsula, there is a vast plateau known as the North Jeolla Plateau. It is relatively flat and is used for agricultural purposes. (Figure 1).

The most important rivers are the Yalu, the Han, the Nakdong and the Taedong. The Yalu is the northernmost river and forms the border between North Korea and China. The Han is relatively short but flows through the South Korean capital of Seoul separating it in half. Consequently, it splits the southwestern plateau. The Nakdong River is the longest in South Korea, it begins in the Taebaek Mountains in the east and flows westward, passing through major cities such as Daegu and Busan, before emptying into the Korea Strait. The Taedong flows through the Northern capital Pyongyang and, much like the Han, splits the plateau.



(Figure 1)³⁸

³⁸ Topographic map of the territory claimed by North Korea after the Armistice (1953), note that when the war started the border was the 38N parallel also indicated on the map. Created with GMT from SRTM data. From Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 3.0



(Figure 2)³⁹

³⁹ Topographic map of South Korea after the Armistice (1953), note that when the war started the border was the 38N parallel also indicated on the map. Created with GMT from SRTM data. CC BY-SA 3.0

It is apparent from both the description and maps that conducting military operations in Korea is very difficult, especially from a logistical point of view. The rugged terrain makes it so the only possible place for large-scale operations is the western flatlands, greatly restricting the front. Furthermore, these flatlands are crossed east to west by large rivers which further complicate the scenario. This means that there are some constraints in the range of operations possible and logistics routes have severe limitations.

Because of Korea's rough terrain, the most inhabited part is the lowlands along the western coastline. This means that major settlements are located along a north-south axis. The railroads were built accordingly and connected the North to the South but did very little to improve East-West communications.⁴⁰

This is due both to the fact that building railroads in the plains is faster and cheaper but also to the fact that all major economic areas are located along the western coastline. This means that there is no meaningful infrastructure on the East-West axis. The main railroad along that axis was the Pyongyang-Wonsan connection which also meant that securing it was paramount for any meaningful advances in the north.⁴¹ Furthermore, all sources concur in saying that the roads were in a terrible state and unsuited for heavy transport.⁴²

For these reasons alone the UN army's logistical capacity was greatly reduced, but there were even further issues. One example is the decision to split the commands of the UN forces in Korea which created widespread confusion through the whole resupply chain. General MacArthur decided to split the command chains of the 8th Army (employed in all land operations in Korea) and the X Corps which would instead perform the naval invasion (they are the units that performed the landing at Inchon for example)⁴³, he did so ironically due to logistics considerations tied with Korean Geography, believing that it would smooth the process but further complicated an already chaotic situation.

In fact, all Logistics were handled by the 2nd Logistical Command attached to the Eighth US Army. However, the situation was difficult from the very beginning. First of all, it had to operate three separate supply lines: one for US-UN troops, one for the UK and Commonwealth and one for the ROK army. This was necessary because they needed to account for the expenses of everything delivered so that the US government could reimburse its allies as agreed. Furthermore, the 2nd did not really control all aspects of the logistics but simply handled whatever was dumped in Korea for them by the Far East Command located in Japan.⁴⁴ They could not place specific orders to the US since they did not have a direct line of contact with them and could not correctly assess the needs in the field because there were no liaison officers between them and the units on the front lines.⁴⁵ In addition to that, it was also severely understaffed, it lacked any promotion opportunities meaning morale was suboptimal and it had only approximately 200 trucks. Too few overall and certainly not adequate for the rugged roads of Korea which made those already limited trucks suffer from severe attrition.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Appleman, P.117

⁴¹ Appleman, 319

⁴² Correa, Edward L. JR: Logistics and the Chinese Communist intervention during the Korean Conflict (1950-1953) P.2, and, Zimmerman P.41, Appleman P.16 and P.117

⁴³ Appleman, Chapter XXV

⁴⁴ Zimmerman, P.12

⁴⁵ Zimmerman, p12

⁴⁶ Zimmerman, p7 and p45

The Eighth Army tried to supplement the personnel shortage by enlisting a large number of locals to be employed as cheap labor for the logistical machine.⁴⁷ They were crucial for the functioning of the command but, as I stated, they were unskilled workers. There were frequent errors in freighter loading, problems dealing with language barriers, and they could not substitute what the 2nd command was in dire need of trained logistics officers. Managing these workers was a significant issue throughout the entire duration of the war, due to factors such as low wages and a high inflation rate. Daily wages received by Korean laborers were inadequate to meet their daily requirements, and the rapidly rising inflation only intensified the issue. Consequently, there was a high turnover of labor, frequent absenteeism during inclement weather, imbalanced and damaged cargo shipments, and regular occurrences of theft, particularly of essential supplies. In certain instances, entire truckloads would go missing.⁴⁸

Finally, the huge number of Prisoners of War (POW) captured after retaking South Korea also was straining the 2nd Logistical Command resources and personnel. The inclusion of civilian employees, specifically Korean indigenous personnel, along with the logistical challenges arising from the internment of over 150,000 prisoners of war and the extensive graves registration, posed significant obstacles for the organizations involved in logistical planning and operational support.⁴⁹ Among these challenges, the shortage of personnel emerged as the most crucial issue. The service support units of the Eighth Army's Logistical Command were operating with a strength below 30 percent when they were assigned for deployment to Korea.⁵⁰

In this situation splitting commands added to the overall very confusing situation of the 2nd command. Now the X Corps could place independent requests not only to the 2nd command of the Eighth Army but also directly to the Japanese logistics office which was the organ to which the 2nd command placed their orders in the first place. This disrupted the chain of supply and produced countless issues of duplication. In practice the X corps would receive double supply, both from the 2nd command and then from the JLCOM, leaving some Eighth Army units to “pay the bill” and receive fewer munitions.⁵¹ For example, When the UN army started its march north, they were already in a precarious logistical situation. Of the two corps present in Seoul the 8th army was composed of, only one, the I Corps, which proceeded into North Korea. The other one, the IX Corps stayed behind in Seoul since they could not supply both past the Han River.⁵²

The importance of the dwindling logistical situation is further highlighted by the I corps' plan to march on the Yalu River. Those units were advancing with only one day of ammunition, one and one-half of POL, and three-to-four days of Class I supplies.⁵³ The terrible road network, the chronic shortage of trucks and the lacking and destroyed infrastructure of Korea prevented the local commanders from doing any better and resupplying while still advancing fast on the border, effectively outrunning their “tail”. When they finally made the last push on the Yalu, on November 24, 1950, they were behind schedule and still facing shortcomings.

⁴⁷ Zimmerman, p.13-23, for further reference:

Chung, Patrick. “From Korea to Vietnam.” *Radical History Review* 2019, no. 133 (2019): 31–55.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-7160053>.

⁴⁸ Lee,

⁴⁹ Zimmerman, p.13-23

⁵⁰ Zimmerman, p.36

⁵¹ Zimmerman, p. 14-16

⁵² Correa p3

⁵³ Correa, p2

The situation was so dire that even on the early advance to Pyongyang most combat vehicles operated without the certainty to have fuel for the next day, on a day-to-day basis.⁵⁴ Fixing trains was a priority, especially by repairing the railroad bridges over the rivers north of Taegu but even then, when supply could pass through Seoul by rail they could proceed only as far as Munsan-ni on the south bank of the Imjin River. This was still 320 Km below the Eighth Army front at the Ch'ongch'on River in late October.⁵⁵

Further problems ensued during the retreat from both Pyongyang and Seoul which were in the process of being designed as supply hubs when the evacuation started. The geographical features of Pyongyang itself presented challenges. Due to the city's division by the Taedong River, it was necessary to establish two supply points. One supply point was located on the southern side of the city to handle cargo arriving by rail and air from the south, while the other was situated across the river to handle cargo coming from Chamnampo. The transportation of supplies between these two points relied solely on pontoon bridges. This transportation of supplies and equipment proved to be the most demanding aspect of the entire operation. It required the northward movement and forward positioning of supplies and replacement equipment to support daily needs, while simultaneously ensuring that any excess supplies were moved southward and kept at a safe distance from the advancing enemy to prevent losses.⁵⁶

The retreat from Seoul was completed by January 5, considerable amounts of POL and other supplies had to be destroyed to prevent them from being captured.⁵⁷ Further deteriorating the already precarious situation.

The situation got better after the stabilization of the lines, allowing for more US counterattacks that, in the end, managed to push the PVA back to the 38th parallel. However, the constraints posed by Korean geography and infrastructure could never be totally solved.

MacArthur asserts that he could have won the war with “500,000 of Chiang’s troops and a couple of Marine divisions”⁵⁸ but his logistical capacity had strict constraints. Even if the Truman administration was willing to invest in an all-out war in Asia, it would not have changed the fundamental constraints of the scenario. These constraints are to be found in Korean geography and lack of infrastructure that in turn hinder the overall logistical capacity. Building up an efficient logistical infrastructure in the Korean challenging geography would have taken huge amounts of resources and, most importantly, time. It is unlikely that additional investments could have changed the situation drastically. Additionally, we must take into consideration two huge limitations to this argument. Firstly, again, Korean topography made building those additional infrastructure costly and lengthy. Secondly, it was a very mobile war, and the changing front did not provide the US enough time to better field infrastructure, largely relying on Japanese-era facilities.⁵⁹

Even if the administration agreed to pour half a million Chinese nationalists into Korea the already overburdened 2nd logistic command would have struggled to keep them supplied and thus combat effective. MacArthur believed in the century-old military creed that more guns, bombs and men simply translate into a more powerful army, which automatically raises the rate of success of the

⁵⁴ Appleman, p638

⁵⁵ Appleman, Chapter XXXII

⁵⁶ Lee

⁵⁷ Correa, p8

⁵⁸ Considine Interview, NYT

⁵⁹ Killblane, Richard E. “Operation Yo-Yo: Transportation During the First Year of the Korean War” *Army Sustainment* 45, no. 5 (2013): 56. 57-58

battlefield. If, as the old saying goes, “god is on the side of the heaviest battalions” then certainly a greater investment in the war by Washington would translate into a better chance for victory. However, this is a simplistic assumption. While obviously in theory the more numerous your army is the better, logistical capacity must not be ignored, the complexity of the terrain, the restrictions implied with expeditionary warfare a dwindling and chaotic Logistical Command in chronic need of trained personnel are all problems that could have not been solved simply by throwing money or levies at it. These constraints in turn limit the logistical capacity and the effectiveness of the troops fielded, simply augmenting the number of the army would put further pressure on the supply lines with the result that the whole army would be undersupplied or (as in the case of the Eighth Army in Pyongyang) that a significant portion of it would have been left behind.

In my opinion, the PVA and Chinese intervention is further proof of my theory. The PVA had a great overall manpower advantage. In January 1951 they had 500,000 soldiers in Korea, 175,000 more than the UN army.⁶⁰ And yet the numeric inferior UN army was able to launch its counteroffensives, effectively beating back the PVA and liberating Seoul in March. The main reason that the same army that beat back the UN from the Yalu and had a clear numerical advantage was forced on the retreat in early 1951 is logistics. The same problems that the UN faced north, now the PVA was facing past the Han River. The PVA had a chronic lack of supplies that made their numbers much less relevant. I have already discussed the general lowering of artillery fire rate due to ammunition shortages, but lack of artillery shells (or ammunition in general) is not the only thing that damages an army. The PVA had high attrition-related losses, mainly because they could not provide winter clothing for all their troops which froze to death in high numbers in the 1950-1951 Korean winter.⁶¹

Manpower advantage in a war almost entirely fought on narrow plateaus and that develops vertically on a North-South axis has far less significance than logistical capacity. Both armies failed in controlling conquered territory once they had outrun their logistical capacity, rendering their forces vastly less effective, no matter the numbers.

Consequently, no amount of additional manpower, and by extension for the US political action, could change the intrinsic relations between logistic capacity and army performance. Therefore, MacArthur’s claim to be able to win the war “in 10 days”⁶² with an extensive augment of the troops at his disposal does not seem realistic. In turn, I would say that Truman’s decision to not increase the number of US troops in Korea did not have an impact on the overall equilibrium of the forces, even if he committed more troops those would not have been combat effective due to everything we just discussed.

While the impact of the number of troops committed was not so significant, there are other ways in which lack of US commitment impacted the war, one of these (and arguably the most important) is the preparation for the war and fitting of the ROKA.

Air Strikes in Manchuria

But what if MacArthur could have prevented the PVA from crossing the Yalu as he had affirmed at the Wake Island conference?⁶³ The last issue of commitment I want to mention regards airstrikes. In particular the ban put in place by Truman to strike objectives in Chinese Manchuria. According to

⁶⁰ Baker, p.107

⁶¹ Crocker, p.78

⁶² Considine interview

⁶³“Substance of Statements Made at Wake Island Conference” October 15, 1950, P.11

MacArthur, this prevented him from effectively stopping the PVA invasion by bombing the bridges and infrastructure connecting North Korea to China.⁶⁴

This claim however harbors several problems. First of all, when the PVA intervention happened the Yalu was frozen, making it impossible to intercept all PVA crossings either way⁶⁵. Secondly, the logistical and operational constraints of launching such airstrikes deep in Manchuria were really high. Thirdly, and probably the most important point, the political cost associated with expanding the war to mainland China was too great. As the NSC/81 stated, the US objective in Korea should pursue the independence and unity of Korea while not risking a general war,⁶⁶ since it would have drawn US resources needed elsewhere. Even if that report was written before the PVA attack, statements concerning the issue remained of the same advice even later, stating that the US should not be permitted to become engaged in a general conflict with China⁶⁷.

However, airpower was one of the US's main advantages during the war⁶⁸ and restraining that (even if marginally) had an impact. In hindsight, it's challenging to definitively conclude whether airstrikes in Manchuria would have been decisively useful or not. Their impact would depend on various factors, including the scale, timing, and targets of such strikes, as well as the Chinese and Soviet responses. Opinions on that varied in the US, Report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Central Intelligence Agency, November 9, 1950, asserted that the Airstrike north of the Yalu into Manchuria was not likely to increase the possibility of Soviet intervention, on the other hand they will probably increase of communist Chinese commitment but remained vague.⁶⁹

Overall, it is unclear to what extent Truman had an impact with this decision. On one hand we know that it restricted an area in which the US had significant advantages, on the other the extent of their usefulness is unclear. Furthermore, the freezing of the Yalu negated the possibility of inflicting heavy damage on the PVA crossings, no matter Truman's ban.⁷⁰

Pre-War Commitment

I argue that the main decision which had a perceivable effect until 1953 was regarding the definition of the "American perimeter defense". The concept was introduced in the environment of the early Cold War because of the "Truman Doctrine". It wanted to define what were the US's main objectives regarding its security and the containment of communism.

It was decided that Korea was outside of this perimeter and thus a "secondary front" so to speak.⁷¹ As a consequence, the US main effort was directed elsewhere, in Europe and in the USSR itself. In fact, after NSC-68 and the birth of "asymmetric containment", Korea was to be abandoned by the US troops since it was deemed not important enough for a general US commitment.⁷² Furthermore, the occupation could not go on in any case since the newborn UN was already pushing for the end of

⁶⁴ NYT, *ibidem*

⁶⁵ Letter from General MacArthur to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea", November 28, 1950, Wilson Center Digital Archive, FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII.

⁶⁶ National Security Council Report 81, "United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea", September 1, 1950

⁶⁷ REPORT, NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL POLICY ON KOREA, NOVEMBER 6 1950

⁶⁸ See this passage from Crocker discussing Chinese supply destroyed by airstrikes: Crocker p66

⁶⁹ Courses of Action Relative to Communist China and Korea," National Security Council Report 101, January 12, 1951 |

⁷⁰ "Letter from General MacArthur to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea" *ibidem*

⁷¹ John J. Muccio Oral History Interview, December 27, 1973 by Richard D. McKinzie

⁷² REPORT BY THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES WITH RESPECT TO KOREA Washington, April 2, 1948. Nsc8

foreign occupation of Korea.⁷³ The US then decided to leave and train a local army to quell the communist insurgency present.⁷⁴ In fact, the national Korean army was thought to be a counterinsurgency force rather than a regular army. Also because they wanted to dissuade President Rhee from invading the North.⁷⁵

But in what way this affected the Korean War and was it perceivable when effectively the armistice was reached? First of all, we should note that this is a problem of “resource allocation”. Truman after WW2 had to demobilize the economy, the US army did not have the numbers or the resources it had during the Second World War.

As we have seen, an escalation of efforts after the war started would have produced meager results, I find much more compelling the argument that if the US had helped more the ROK army before the war by training and providing more equipment it would have not needed to intervene so drastically, thus changing greatly the course of the war.

What forced the US to intervene in the war was the collapse of the ROK army and their total inability to withstand the KPA attack; it is not unreasonable to think that if the ROKA had been able to resist and fight on its own maybe the intervention would not have been necessary. The report by the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Korea (NSC 8, April 2, 1948)⁷⁶ stated that the defense of South Korea was important for reassuring allies of US commitment to their security and for the credibility of the UN. However, due to UN pressures to end the post-WW2 occupation of Korea, US troops must be largely withdrawn. To counterbalance, NSC8 suggests helping to create a native land force.⁷⁷ The problem was, and it is present in the report, the weak economic status of South Korea. The newly formed state was cut by its historical source of raw materials in the North and had been ravaged by Japanese colonial occupation and WW2 (forced labor, despoliations etc.), as such, their economy in 1948 was largely reliant on US aid and could not sustain a large native army.⁷⁸

This meant that the new ROK would rely almost entirely on American financial backing and imports added to what remained of WW2 Japanese equipment in Korea.⁷⁹ The decision of the US to focus mainly on economic aid should come naturally in my opinion. If their main objective was keeping Korea safe with the minimum US military presence possible Korea would need to be able to defend itself, and it could not without a strong economy backing its army.

This did not mean however that the US did not in fact try to arm a Korean army. The United States agreed to support a ROK army composed of 65,500, plus 35,000 national police and a coast guard of 4,000.⁸⁰ However Rhee rapidly tried to expand that and in 1949 the ROKA counted 100,000 between officers and men, expanded the national police to 53,000 and the Coast Guard to 6,200. They also tried to create a Marine Corps and an Air Force without US support.⁸¹

⁷³ Millett, 125

⁷⁴ NSC 8/2, Report by the National Security Council to the President Washington, March 22, 1949.

⁷⁵ McKinzie Muccio interview

⁷⁶ REPORT BY THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL ON THE POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES WITH RESPECT TO KOREA WASHINGTON, April 2, 1948.

⁷⁷ NSC 8, *ibidem*

⁷⁸ Millett, 102-103 118

⁷⁹ Millett, 179

⁸⁰ Millett, 213

⁸¹ Millett, 219-220

The US refused to supply heavy equipment and a bigger army for several considerations. First of all they believed, as I have already mentioned, that a big and efficient ROKA could only be sustained by a greater ROK economy, thus focusing a lot on economic aid.⁸² In addition to that, the ROKA was framed to be more a counter-insurgency force rather than a regular one,⁸³ meaning that also in regards to equipment sent the focus was on lighter vehicles.

Furthermore the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCF) believed that “From a strategic point of view, the position of the JCF concerning Korea summarized is that Korea is of little strategic value to the U.S. and [the] commitment by the U.S. of U.S. military forces in Korea would be ill-advised and impracticable given our heavy international obligations as compared with our current strength.”⁸⁴ These were the same considerations that led Truman in his conduit before and during the war, Europe came first and the limited US resources must be allocated first and foremost there. As proof of it, we can see in the United States: Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949 that \$1.1 billion of foreign security investments are directed to Europe while only \$ 28 million to “type III” countries outside the general area of China.⁸⁵ While it may seem odd nowadays to talk about the unpreparedness or small dimension of the US army we should not forget that after WW2 the US experienced a demobilization phase in which a lot of skilled personnel went back to civilian life. Examples are the War Mobilization and Reconversion Act of 1944⁸⁶ which established an Office of War Mobilization and Adjustment, the administration initiated mechanisms to coordinate the management of excess wartime assets, facilitate the transition to civilian production, and institute a comprehensive plan for training and reintegrating the workforce into civilian employment; and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill) which provided a range of benefits to World War II veterans, including education and vocational training, low-cost home loans, and unemployment compensation. While not directly reducing personnel, the G.I. Bill played a significant role in supporting veterans as they transitioned to civilian life.⁸⁷ To grasp how sudden and disruptive this process was: when the Army initiated the partial demobilization of its air, ground, and service forces on May 12, 1945, it comprised approximately 8,290,000 personnel. By September 1, 1945, its total strength had decreased to about 8,020,000. By the conclusion of 1945, this strength had further reduced to 4,228,936. At the close of the fiscal year in 1946, the total stood at 1,889,690, marking a decrease of 6,133,614 in the nine months following V-J Day. However, the significant decline in overall strength had started to transition into a more gradual decrease. When World War II demobilization concluded on June 30, 1947, the total strength was 989,664, with the effective strength being only 925,163.⁸⁸

But there were military concerns too, in October 1949, the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Korea (ROK) formally requested 189 M26 tanks. However, the interim head of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) informed him that the KMAG staff believed that the nature of the Korean landscape and the state of roads and bridges would not facilitate effective tank operations.⁸⁹ We have

⁸² Millett, 112

⁸³ Muccio interview

⁸⁴ Millett p216

⁸⁵ United States: Mutual Defense Assistance Act of 1949, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Supplement: Official, pp29-38 9

⁸⁶ U.S. Congress. United States Code: War Mobilization and Reconversion Act of , 50a U.S.C. §§ 1651 to 1667 Suppl. 2 1946. 1946. Periodical.

⁸⁷ An act to provide Federal Government aid for the readjustment in civilian life of returning World War II veterans, June 22, 1944; *Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996*; *General Records of the United States Government*; Record Group 11; National Archives.

⁸⁸ Sparrow, John C., *History of Personnel Demobilization in the United States Army*, Department of the Army Pamphlet 20-210, July 1952, p.265

⁸⁹ Appleman 16

seen that effectively the Korean landscape in general is not really adaptable to massive maneuvers but there are certainly places in which they can be used and are effective. One example is the western plains we talked about before. Furthermore, even the heavy equipment effectively provided had some evident deficiencies. Around the same period, a KMAG officer highlighted to Ambassador Muccio that the equipment supplied to the Republic of Korea (ROK) was insufficient to effectively defend the border. He pointed out that North Korean artillery had a significantly longer range than the ROK's 105-mm. howitzer M3, enabling them to shell ROK positions freely from a distance beyond the reach of the ROK's retaliatory fire.⁹⁰ Furthermore by June 1950, the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army had a limited quantity of artillery and mortar ammunition available, which would be depleted within a short span of combat. Approximately 15 percent of the army's weapons and 35 percent of its vehicles were inoperable. The initial six-month stock of spare parts provided by the United States had been fully used up by that point.⁹¹

To summarize, in June 1950, the North Korean Army displayed distinct advantages over the South Korean forces in various aspects. Notably, the North Koreans possessed 150 well-equipped medium tanks (T34/85 Soviet fabrication from WW2) armed with 85-mm. guns, which could penetrate all American tanks' frontal armor except the M-26 "Pershing" one.⁹² while the South Koreans had no tanks at their disposal.

The North Korean artillery arsenal encompassed three varieties— the 122-mm. howitzer, the 76-mm. self-propelled gun, and the 76-mm. divisional gun with an impressive range surpassing 14,000 yards, which significantly outperformed the ROK Army's 105-mm. howitzer M3, having a range of approximately 7.5 km. In terms of divisional artillery pieces, the North Koreans held a numerical advantage of about three to one over their South Korean counterparts. Additionally, the North Koreans maintained a small tactical air force, composed of 150 Yak-9 and IL-10 combat aircraft, designed for ground-attack operations.⁹³

The North Korean assault units consisted of 89,000 combat-ready troops, outnumbering the approximately 65,000 personnel in South Korean divisions. Furthermore, North Korea boasted an extra 18,600 well-trained troops within its Border Constabulary, along with 23,000 partially trained troops distributed across three reserve divisions. In contrast, South Korea relied on roughly 45,000 national police, albeit they were neither equipped nor trained for tactical purposes. The naval forces of both sides, including the small coast guard, were of comparable significance and effectively offset each other. It is worth noting that the distinct superiority of the North Korean Army in these varied aspects went largely unnoticed by United States military authorities before the invasion. In fact, there existed a widespread belief, evidently shared by Brig. Gen. William L. Roberts, Chief of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG), that the ROK Army would easily repel any North Korean invasion if it were to occur.⁹⁴

The result was disaster, when the attack occurred the ROKA was overrun and almost destroyed. During the initial months of 1950's summer, the 1st, 7th, 6th, and 8th Divisions, which were regarded as the most capable within the ROKA, were strategically positioned along the Parallel in the mentioned sequence, progressing from the western to the eastern side. Adjacent to the 1st Division, located at the farthest western point of the line, was the 17th Regiment of the Capital Division

⁹⁰ Appleman, 16-17

⁹¹ Appleman 17

⁹² Millett, 193, for further reference: Ogorkiewicz, Richard M Survival; Soviet Armor since 1945 Jul 1, 1961; 3, 4;

⁹³ Millett, 193

⁹⁴ Millett, 250-251

positioned on the Ongjin Peninsula. The remaining four divisions were spread across various regions within the country, with three of them actively involved in counter-guerrilla operations and the training of small unit tactics in the interior and southern areas.⁹⁵ This was certainly a factor. While completely inferior to the KPA in both numbers and capabilities the defense always favors the defender⁹⁶. However, only a fourth of said divisions were effectively in defensive position, the rest was in the rear, training doing counterinsurgency or simply on leave. If they would have been able to repel the northern attack if the intelligence apparatus was able to predict the northern invasion is a good question to ask ourselves. It is certainly true however that the odds were against the ROKA due to all the armament issues they were facing which derived directly from US decision-making. In this aspect obviously Truman had a huge impact, the decision to redirect resources mainly to Europe was his so it was the decision to hold back funds for the ROKA.

With the information at their disposal the US government acted in a reasonable way, however it is undeniable that the ROK army that they devised to be a deterrent to a KPA invasion proved wholly inadequate. Soviet provided tank superiority and a modern enough air force weighted heavily in favor of the KPA since the ROKA lacked both. While the reasoning behind it could be valid from their standpoint in the late forties, in the great scheme of things it proved ill-advised and certainly heavily impacted the war. The inferiority of the ROKA in both men, training and materiel proved fatal for the chances of the ROK to survive the KPA onslaught on its own.

We could say however that a big problem for the ROK during the invasion was that they were deployed in a counterinsurgency and that no one in Washington expected an attack. We could in fact talk of an intelligence failure, but that was not isolated, a year later when MacArthur almost reached the Yalu the same intelligence apparatus failed to predict China's intervention. So, while it is certainly true that preparation for the war was greatly inadequate one could argue and say that if the intelligence apparatus managed to predict the invasion the ROKA would have fared at least marginally better. We know for example that four divisions and one regiment were stationed near the border. However, only one regiment of each division and one battalion of the separate regiment were in the defensive positions at the Parallel.⁹⁷The Korean People's Army struck a surprised garrison in thinly held defensive positions with devastating effects on the defenders.

⁹⁵ Appleman p. 16

⁹⁶ Clausewitz, 160-163

⁹⁷ Appleman, 21

INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence is another topic in which literature splits. As I introduced in the previous chapter, failing to predict the PVA entry into the war was a turning moment. But who should have predicted that and who contributed the most to the intelligence failure is a tough question.

After the recapture of South Korea, all plans for the northern advance were drawn with the clear assumption that China was not going to intervene, and the war was basically already won.⁹⁸ Even the army movements suggest so, the Eighth Army marched on the China-Korea border almost in a straight line. Failing to predict the PVA intervention magnified its effectiveness greatly.

At the start of the Korean War, the most prominent intelligence unit within FECOM was the 441st Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) Detachment, which had a primary focus on combating Japanese subversive elements. This detachment reported directly to MacArthur in his role as Supreme Commander Allied Powers, not as the head of FECOM. While most US intelligence assets were directed into Japan or the USSR, General Willoughby, MacArthur's G-2⁹⁹, maintained a residual intelligence organization in Korea known as the Korea Liaison Office (KLO). The KLO was underfunded, understaffed and received little attention from Tokyo.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, reports submitted by an Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) team stationed in Korea were also disregarded. Intelligence stemming from the limited CIA presence in Korea faced a similar lukewarm response from FECOM. Notably, the information these entities received was primarily gathered through liaisons with Republic of Korea (ROK) sources. This data was viewed as unreliable, since South Koreans had a vested interest in portraying the situation in an alarmistic tone to further their goals, further complicating the environment.¹⁰¹

To better understand why failing to predict the PVA entrance was such a huge factor in the war, we should dive a bit deeper into the UN army's situation and attitude during their invasion of North Korea. The Far East command had in fact a rather triumphalist attitude after the Inchon landing and the capture of Pyongyang. Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, commander of the Eighth US Army, who had recently been desperately begging for ammunition, informed MacArthur in the Far East Command that he now possessed an adequate supply.¹⁰² He suggested that henceforth, ammunition ships from the United States should be redirected to Japan. This attitude was also to blame for what was discussed in the previous chapter about the 8th Army march north and its general dire supply situation. Not much thought was given to it since everybody thought the war was already over. MacArthur in particular assured Truman of this during their meeting at Wake Island. He argued, as his generals assured him, that there was no way China would intervene now. If they wanted to attack, he argued, why now that the North Koreans were routed and not before when they were winning? Furthermore, in the East Asia Command, multiple generals assured him there was no way that Mao would attack. And, if it happened, they argued that their air force could destroy the PVA crossing the bridges on the Yalu. This triumphalist attitude is also reflected on resupply decisions. All reinforcements apart from 17,000 NCOs were canceled by the Pentagon¹⁰³. Moreover, on October 22, 1950, General Walker approached General MacArthur, seeking permission to redirect all

⁹⁸ Bernstein, 429-430

⁹⁹ G-2 refers to the military intelligence staff in the United States Army at the Divisional Level and above
<https://www.dami.army.pentagon.mil/>

¹⁰⁰ Finnegan, John P. the Evolution of US Army HUMINT: Intelligence Operations in the Korean War *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 55, No. 2 (Extracts, June 2011) pp57-58

¹⁰¹ Finnegan, *ibidem*, 57-58

¹⁰² Correa, p.2

¹⁰³ Correa, p2

incoming bulk-loaded ammunition ships from the United States to Japan instead of Korea. He believed that there was an ample supply of ammunition in Korea to meet future requirements. MacArthur granted the request and took further action to divert six ammunition ships, carrying 105-mm. and 155-mm. shells as well as Air Force bombs, either to Hawaii or back to the United States. Additionally, General Weible, the Commanding General of the Japan Logistical Command, contacted the Commanding General of the San Francisco Port of Embarkation, requesting the cancellation of all pending requests for ground ammunition and the unloading of any ships still present in the port.¹⁰⁴

The Far East Command (FECOM) dismissed a report saying there were signs of Chinese troops on the ground since July 1950, months before the full-blown intervention. The command dismissed them believing they were North Koreans dressed and equipped by the Chinese, giving the green light for the northern push.¹⁰⁵ As we have seen, the sudden advance and retreat had put a further strain on the supply chain, which has probably caused the most damage. When the Logistical Command could plan for predesigned fallback depots for a retreat and planned forward depots for an advance, the situation did not repeat itself. In any case, the Chinese second phase offensive created great damage to the supply lines, not only as the supply scuttles were destroyed but also diverted. During the UN army march on the Yalu, the main supply ports were at Pyongyang and Inchon (Seoul) but now freighters directed there had to be called off because the cities were at risk. Tons of vital supplies to keep the UN forces fighting could not reach port and were diverted to Japan first and to Pusan later, resulting in a massive loss of time.¹⁰⁶ This means that the intelligence failure was crucial in the UN's failure to win the war in late 1950. The attack on the north was planned without taking enough care of effective resistance, units were pushed north with minimal supplies and others were simply kept in the rear, paving the way to defeat.

The biggest failure is arguably in late October. As I pointed out earlier, since in July there were reports that could indicate an intervention even if they were not definitive.¹⁰⁷ By October there were multiple reports of Chinese POWs¹⁰⁸ and contacts across the front¹⁰⁹, while at the Wake Island meeting with Truman MacArthur was negating any possible Chinese intervention in the war. MacArthur stated at Wake Island: "The Chinese have 300,000 men in Manchuria. Of these probably not more than 100–115,000 are distributed along the Yalu River. Only 50–60,000 could be gotten across the Yalu River. They have no Air Force. Now that we have bases for our Air Force in Korea if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter"¹¹⁰. It is true that the PVA had no air force, but the Soviets would provide theirs from Manchuria, and the number of troops with which the Chinese crossed was greatly understated, amounting to roughly 180,000¹¹¹. MacArthur was confident at the time that in the remote case of a Chinese intervention aerial reconnaissance would be able to spot troop movements early enough, but this did not happen. Furthermore, even when they knew about the PVA's concentration of forces north of the Yalu between July and October 1950, they dismissed it and kept preparing for the invasion.¹¹² They kept negating the possibility of a Chinese intervention even after the Eighth Army started to capture Chinese soldiers.¹¹³ Also, ROC and ROK sources were

¹⁰⁴ Appleman, P. 669

¹⁰⁵ Crocker, P.50

¹⁰⁶ Correa, p.6

¹⁰⁷ Crocker, 30-31

¹⁰⁸ Prisoners Of War

¹⁰⁹ Crocker 48-50, Appleman, chapter XXXIII

¹¹⁰ New York Times, October 11, 1950;

¹¹¹ Crocker, p.76

¹¹² Haynes, 15

¹¹³ Haynes,40

hinting at a Chinese intervention but they too were dismissed simply for a lack of trust, as previously mentioned.¹¹⁴

It did not help that General Willoughby, in charge of providing MacArthur with daily intelligence summary, had an outdated understanding of China, scarce sources and a general personal contempt for the Chinese.¹¹⁵ General Willoughby based all his research and conclusions on Nationalist Chinese performance during WW2 and the subsequent civil war. Since the ROC army lost the civil war, we can also understand where his, and of the FECOM's in general, dismissal of Chinese capabilities came from. He based his intelligence reports on the faction that lost the civil war. Even assuming that the organization was similar it would not be farfetched to assert that nationalist performance was at least inferior to their communist counterpart since they lost the war. However, this was all ignored, and potential Chinese capabilities were not taken into consideration.¹¹⁶ A lot of later historians point at Willoughby with much vigor.

Willoughby and MacArthur had a strong bond that went back to the Second World War. Willoughby tended to revere the friend and present him only evidence that confirmed the General's views.¹¹⁷ Some articles arrive to call him a sycophant, eager to please MacArthur and support his final attack on the Yalu River to disregard any evidence of a Communist Chinese attack. His loyalty in never contradicting him made him disregard the more blatant evidence of Chinese intervention and when it was so in the open that it could not be avoided, he agreed again with MacArthur that their air force could singlehandedly repel them.¹¹⁸

On top of that, Willoughby (and by extension MacArthur) was openly hostile to the CIA and fueled inter-branch rivalries.¹¹⁹ They mainly denied the agency (CIA) access to intelligence reports or facilities in Japan, as both remained unimpressed with its human intelligence operations.¹²⁰ This was a general thing In the Far East, the tasks and obligations of human intelligence were significantly divided. This division resulted from simultaneous intelligence operations and conflicts between the armed forces and the Central Intelligence Agency before and during the Korean War. Each of the armed services strived to maintain their specific tactical and operational intelligence roles while also accommodating the intelligence requirements of their own branches. These competing missions led to internal conflicts and duplication of efforts also from the part of other agencies and resulted in a very confusing situation overall.¹²¹ MacArthur and Willoughby have always viewed the CIA and its predecessor, the OSS, with contempt and tried to push them on the sidelines also during the Pacific operations of WW2.¹²² Willoughby was in fact fully trying to assert his predominance over all other intelligence-gathering organizations in the Far East: "Competitive, quasi-independent agencies must be eliminated, or ruthlessly subordinated as they tend to unduly assert their individuality and operate independently, causing friction, duplication of effort, loss of valuable time, general inefficiency, and unsatisfactory command relationships. Centralized control was found to be imperative if intelligence was to operate at peak efficiency; everything else was tried reluctantly, only to result in failure"¹²³.

¹¹⁴ Baptism by fire p 30, Finnegan p58

¹¹⁵ Crocker, 2-3, 15

¹¹⁶ Crocker, 3

¹¹⁷ Knight, 22

¹¹⁸ Haynes, 82-83

¹¹⁹ Knight 93,, Haynes 68-69

¹²⁰ Knight, P.32

¹²¹ Azotea, P21

¹²² Knight p.60

¹²³ Knight P.68

While his take on the centralization of the intelligence-gathering effort may be valid, the effect of the Korean War scenario was disastrous, leading to widespread mistrust and confusion.

However, delegating all ills to Willoughby would be wrong, he had moments of brilliance during the campaign and was an expert intelligence officer albeit with all the flaws just explained. He still maintained KLO even if Truman placed all of Korea out of the defensive perimeter. His role in the success of Operation Chromite was all but marginal and, within the limits of the material assets at his disposal, his tactical insights were remarkable both during and beyond Operation Chromite.¹²⁴

Truman and his administration are not exempt from blame either. A lot of his decisions and policies before the war certainly had a huge impact on the intelligence environment in the Far East. The demobilization of the US war machine after the defeat of Japan left the intelligence departments in the Pacific with shortages of both trained personnel and capabilities. Bills like the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill)¹²⁵ or the War Mobilization and Reconversion Act of 1944¹²⁶ created a great outflow of trained personnel from the military to the private sector creating a vacuum of experience. As the available manpower and defense budget continued to decrease, the armed services were confronted with the need to reduce the extent of their operations and concentrate on addressing the most significant threats to national security. Consequently, the armed forces directed their limited resources toward countering the Soviet Union and its subversive endeavors.¹²⁷ In a way it made sense for Truman, the demobilization policies were widely supported by the general public, happy to leave WW2 behind¹²⁸.

Furthermore, the National Security Act of 1947¹²⁹ (that created the CIA) was also cited as the source of the interbranch rivalries and infighting that plagued the early 1950s which I previously mentioned while talking about Willoughby.¹³⁰ However in my opinion it is a rather weak critique. Firstly, we know that both MacArthur and Willoughby also had frequent fights and problems with the OSS during the Pacific War, which predates the CIA.¹³¹ Furthermore, I don't see why he should be responsible for the infighting, since his only responsibility was reforming an already existing organization.

After the demobilization efforts, Washington focused the remaining resources on the Soviet Union. This made sense since it was clear that the Soviets were going to be the U.S.'s main rival in a rapidly evolving early Cold War. While it made sense, it is undeniable that doing so greatly reduced intelligence-gathering operations in the Pacific. In particular, the decision to exclude Korea from the US strategic defensive perimeter harmed intelligence gathering in Korea, since orders were to focus on Japan and the Soviet Union.

FECOM and Willoughby had substantial assets at their disposal on paper but, budget cuts really hampered their capabilities.¹³² These deficiencies directly mirrored the national security priorities of

¹²⁴ Knight, 163-164

¹²⁵ An act to provide Federal Government aid for the readjustment in civilian life of returning World War II veterans, June 22, 1944; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11;

¹²⁶ U.S. Congress. United States Code: War Mobilization and Reconversion Act of , 50a U.S.C. §§ 1651 to 1667 Suppl. 2 1946. 1946.

¹²⁷ Knight, 93

¹²⁸ Sparrow, p115

¹²⁹ National Archives. National Security Act of 1947, U.S. Government Publishing Office, H.R.2617, 117th Congress

¹³⁰ Knight, p 93

¹³¹ Knight, p60, 93

¹³² Azotea, 13

the Truman administration, which primarily concentrated on Europe and centered around the Soviet threat. These priorities were also shaped by domestic economic and political considerations.¹³³ Coordination effort should have come from the regional commanders who instead only fuelled these rivalries¹³⁴

However: discerning capabilities and predicting actions are two very different things, and it is indeed the job of the government, or of the political, to make such decisions. Willoughby certainly centered intelligence capabilities in the Far East on himself and failed to predict Chinese intervention, insisting until the very end that it was not going to happen,¹³⁵ however it was arguably not his job. As we have stated it is the job of politicians and decision-makers to assert the strategic implication of military action at the international level.

However, after the reorganization of the intelligence services in 1947, the situation was not as clear as we have seen, in particular in the Far East. We should note a few things. Firstly, 90% of all intelligence coming to Washington relied on sources processed through the FECOM and thus Willoughby.¹³⁶ This meant that all personal and professional biases were going to be present in the reports received in Washington. Secondly, the possibility of China intervening was taken into consideration but shot down by MacArthur himself at the Wake Island conference¹³⁷. Thirdly, the political climate of the US did not help the free flow of information necessary for a good intelligence analysis. Those were the years of rampant McCarthyism and accusations of communist sympathies were numerous and seriously taken. Exposing the possibility of a Chinese invasion could have been dangerous if the accuser was not completely sure. He could have been accused of a defeatist attitude and communist sympathies.¹³⁸ Most of the State Department East-Asia experts were either fired or lost credibility after the Communist victory in the Civil War and thus the home intelligence department lacked the necessary regional expertise.¹³⁹ Also, because General MacArthur was extremely popular among Republicans¹⁴⁰ any attack on him and his judgment was not very well received.¹⁴¹ As a result, intelligence arriving in Washington was even more filtered, making their role less prominent. This is an interesting relation since it is not really the political actors that had a role but the environment at large that prevented a good flow of information.

All things combined with the concentration of intelligence capability on himself promoted by Willoughby did not leave Truman or Acheson with all the facts and perspectives necessary to arrive at the right conclusion.

conclusion

My point is not that Truman did not have all the data at his disposal. For example, a CIA report called "Critical Situations in the Far East" of October 1950¹⁴² quite correctly presented the CCP case for invasion believing it to be possible. Also, the claim that barring US planes from flying over Manchuria prevented MacArthur from knowing exactly what happened did not hold particularly well, since it is

¹³³ Knight, p.138

¹³⁴ Knight, 139

¹³⁵ Haynes, 15-16 Azotea, 57-65

¹³⁶ Azotea, p. 54 and Crocker 45-50

¹³⁷ Notes on the Wake Island Conference, October 13, 1950 and "Substance of Statements Made at Wake Island Conference", October 15, 1950

¹³⁸ Baptism by Fire: CIA Analysis of the Korean War p23

¹³⁹ Crocker, p.51

¹⁴⁰ Pierpaoli, 109

¹⁴¹ Bernstein, p435

¹⁴² critical situations in the far east ,ORE 58-50, October 1950

apparent they had knowledge of PVA troops over the border.¹⁴³ Apart from the technological limitation of early 1950s spy planes, we have seen that both the CIA and other FECOM sources knew that there was a Chinese army at the border, they simply believed it was not going to enter Korea. We can say that both MacArthur and Truman knew there was an army at the Manchurian border and both knew of the possibility of invasion. The difference is that all data presented to Truman and his cabinet was flattered in such a way that it reflected MacArthur's opinion much more than reality, regarding the factual possibility of an invasion. Therefore, I believe that FECOM had more responsibility for the intelligence failures than Truman or Acheson. They had all the information necessary to at least suspect it, both in intelligence reports and aerial recon and they simply discarded it. They were basing their assessments of Chinese combat effectiveness on faulty and outdated data and were dismissive of any signs of the upcoming intervention, even if they knew there were Chinese nationals in Korea since July 1950.¹⁴⁴ While it may be true that predicting shifts in other states foreign policy is the duty of the Department of State, I argue that the FECOM had a larger role in this particular intelligence failure. The triumphalist attitude, lack of reliable sources and general dismissal of even the possibility of an intervention are all dependent on them. They simply failed to read the obvious signs, even when the Eighth Army was effectively capturing Chinese POWs they still insisted on the practical impossibility of the situation, making them the first responsible for the Intelligence failure.

However, the political apparatus did have responsibilities. Acheson asserts that one of his major mistakes in the conduit of the Korean War was not stopping MacArthur in his march north, even if he did not consider it a safe course of action. In his memories, while he does not hold back in his criticism of MacArthur, he is equally harsh in his assessment of all presidential advisers, including himself, for missing their "last chance to halt the march to disaster." It was evident to all of them that "something was badly wrong," but they failed to seize the opportunity to rectify it.¹⁴⁵ As the danger escalated, he recalls they all felt a deep sense of apprehension and openly discussed their concerns, but perhaps not as candidly as necessary¹⁴⁶. Acheson admits that he felt constrained in presenting military recommendations to the president that contradicted the views of the chiefs. In turn, the chiefs rigidly adhered to traditional doctrines regarding the autonomy of a theatre commander. In fact, he believed that a much more favorable outcome for the war could have been achieved if MacArthur had stopped at the Pyongyang-Wonsan line.¹⁴⁷ But he, and the government at large failed to do so, contributing to the disastrous march to the Yalu. As it should be the government to dictate military objectives, getting carried on by one's generals' is a mistake. Following Acheson's admission, failing to do so resulted in the disaster at the Yalu River and the subsequent events.

¹⁴³ ORE 58-50, *ibidem* p. 3-4

¹⁴⁴ Crocker, p50

¹⁴⁵ Beisner, p.407

¹⁴⁶ Beisner, 407-408

¹⁴⁷ Beisener, 407

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we have seen that Truman's responsibilities are more tied to the general preparedness of both the ROKA and US intelligence before the war than to the conduit of the conflict. An escalation of the war would have not delivered the US a significant amount of power to effectively tip the balance in Korea due to geographical and logistical considerations. Furthermore, while Truman is not totally exempt, the lion's share of blame for failing to predict the Chinese intervention falls more on the FECOM rather than him or his administration due to all the issues we have discussed.

However, the US got caught unprepared by the North Korean invasion in their policies. The demobilization acts had damaged the numbers and expertise of the US armed forces. Furthermore, the attempt to turn the ROKA in a lighter counter-insurgency army left them duly unprepared for the conventional conflict they faced.

We have seen then that the connection between political action and military outcome is ever-present but not the only determinant factor. Personal attitude from generals, geography and other random factors have a significant impact that may be not overcome through mere policymaking.

In the environment of the early Cold War president Truman had to make tough decisions and some of them certainly has we have seen impacted the US war effort in Korea negatively. However, I believe that the responsibilities of the military command in Korea and external natural factors (such as geography) had an overall larger impact on the War, while Truman had a somewhat larger responsibility for early preparedness of the ROKA.

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