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The Korean War officially began on 25 Jun 1950 when forces of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK - North Korea) invaded the Republic of Korea (ROK - South Korea). After initial stunning successes by both sides, there then followed over 3 years of bloody conflict which ultimately ended in an uneasy status quo ante bellum which still persists.

The central hypothesis to this paper is that the use of military force was an effective policy tool for all parties involved to meet defined political objectives. The degree of success that each state/organisation achieved will be examined in detail. This essay will be limited to analysing the conflict's immediate aftermath and will not consider events beyond the Geneva Conference in Apr 1954. Specifically, this essay will investigate the rationale that led the DPRK's leader (Kim Il Sung) to consider the use of military force to achieve his primary objective of unifying Korea. The causes of the Korean War will also be briefly examined to set analysis in context.

Causes

The decisive event that caused the Korean War was the decision by two US Army Colonels on 10 August 1945 to divide Korea at the 38th parallel[1]. The decision was taken on Aug 10 1945 and for no better reason than "...it would place the capital city [Seoul] in the American zone".[2]From the moment that the Korean partition decision was made public, the leaders of the DPRK and ROK were essentially determined to establish a unified country by diplomatic or military means. Indeed, many in the United States were worried that the ROK would invade the DPRK first, such was the bellicose rhetoric emanating from the ROK President Syngman Rhee. The dividing line on the 38th parallel did not have any historical significance to Koreans of any faction and

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the imposition of an arbitrary dividing line by the joint Soviet/United Commission in Korea came as a total shock[3]. Indeed, Bruce Cumings asserts that the interim United States occupation forces nearly became as unpopular as the newly ousted Japanese once the 38th Parallel decision became widely known[4].

It can therefore be argued that nascent nationalism, coupled with diametrically opposed ideologies and the unfortunate choice of an arbitrary dividing line provided the catalyst for the DPRK invasion of the ROK on 25 Jun 1950. It can also be postulated that Kim Il Sung was left with little option but to resort to military means to bring about his desired end state of unifying Korea.

Military outcomes

From its inception, the Korean War was viewed as a limited war by the principal combatants, who (albeit for different reasons) had no wish to see the conflict escalate into a wider conflagration. The military outcome of the Korean War was indeterminate, with neither side emerging as a clear victor. After the initial period of manoeuvre (from Jun 1950 - Jun 1951) the Korean War settled into a stalemate reminiscent of World War 1 trench warfare. With neither side willing to escalate the conflict to gain a decisive edge, continued operations by UN and Communist forces essentially became a series of (relatively) pointless battles[5] in order to gain territory or exert political leverage at the Armistice negotiations in Panmunjom. When the Korean Armistice was formally signed on 27 Jul 1953, a heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was established following front line positions. Neither side could claim victory in the true sense of the word.

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Political and Strategic Objectives of the Soviet Union

Due to chronic instability in the ROK, the Korean peninsula perhaps presented the best opportunity for a communist leaning 'buffer' state to be established that would protect Soviet and Chinese borders from any perceived American threat. The northern portion of Korea was occupied by Soviet troops, who quickly moved to support indigenous communist orientated 'commissariats'. Kim Il Sung emerged as the favoured choice of the Soviet leadership and the DPRK was established in 1948. Once it became clear that Korea would not be unified by political means alone, and the Soviet Union had successfully tested an atomic bomb, Stalin eventually gave his consent and backing to Kim Il Sung[6] to proceed with the invasion of the ROK, but was purportedly unwilling to widen the conflict and risk a wider war with the USA[7].

Stalin viewed the Korean conflict as a key part of a wider Soviet strategy to embroil the USA (and its allies) in a protracted struggle far away from what both sides regarded as the Centre of Gravity in Europe. In this the Soviets largely succeeded as the USA became wedded to the defence of the ROK on a point of principle after the DPRK invasion. Stalin also determined that it would be perhaps better for the Soviet Union to engage in conflict with the United States at an early juncture, rather than to wait for Germany and Japan to be re-armed, which would greatly increase Western military capability:

"[Stalin] ...added that even if the USA provoked a big war, " let it take place now rather than a few years later, when Japanese militarism will be restored as an American ally, and when the United States and Japan will possess a military spring-board on the continent in the form of Rhee's Korea." [8]
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The Soviet Union's relationship with China was crucial. Stalin viewed newly communist China as the junior partner in the communist world. While content to provide administrative, technical and planning advice, Stalin determined that the Soviet Union would not become overtly involved in any Korean conflict in order to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States. Kim Il Sung visited Moscow in Apr 1950; during this period, Stalin laid out the terms of any DPRK invasion of the ROK as:

The Chinese (specifically Mao Zedong) must approve the invasion;

The DPRK invasion must appear as a counter to an ROK move into the DPRK; and that Kim Il Sung would not be able to rely on overt Soviet support if the USA intervened, but would have to rely on Chinese support[9].

In essence, Stalin determined that there were great advantages to a conflict being fought by proxy between the fledgling communist Chinese state and the United States. A conflagration in Korea that pitted the United States against China would make any chance of rapprochement between the two states highly unlikely and would also fix American attention far from the Soviet vital ground in eastern Europe.

Another key piece of evidence of Soviet strategy was revealed by the former Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev. In his memoirs, Khrushchev gave an explanation of why Stalin decided to support Kim Il Sung's proposed invasion of the ROK. Khrushchev stated that when the United States Secretary of State (Dean Acheson) publicly stated that the ROK was outside of the United States' ' Defence Perimeter[10]', this inadvertently sent a strong signal to

Stalin that the ROK was a “ soft spot” that was worth exploiting[11]. Stalin therefore reasoned that the United States would not commit forces to support the ROK regime in the event of a DPRK invasion[12]. Once it became clear that the Korean Peninsula would not be unified by diplomatic means, Stalin was content to sanction the use of military force (by his DPRK proxy) to bring about unification of Korea.

The eventual outcome of the Korean War did not meet the Soviet primary political goal of establishing a communist, unified Korea as the eventual cease fire line ran almost exactly along the 38th parallel. Despite this, it can be argued that the Soviet Union greatly benefited from the outcomes of the Korean War. The United States was badly shaken by the Chinese intervention in Nov 1950[13]and the loss of American prestige was tangible when United Nations forces were forced into a pell-mell retreat south after the Chinese riposte in Nov 1950. The Korean War diverted the United States from what the Soviet Union determined as its vital ground in Europe. Korea also provided a means to test Soviet military capabilities in combat against the United States, especially in the air. Finally, Korea also allowed the Soviet Union to cement its relationship with China and prevent any rapprochement between China and the United States.

The Soviet Union, by financing and supporting its Chinese and DPRK proxies was thus able to meet the majority of its aims, without becoming overtly involved in the fighting. On the minus side, Soviet support for the DPRK invasion unwittingly provided the justification for huge increases in United States military spending and the rearmament of West Germany and Japan.

The Soviets were henceforth viewed as aggressors bent on spreading
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communism throughout the world, which the United States was clearly going to resist.

United States Political Objectives and Strategy

Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, debate was intense as to how the United States should respond to the perception that Soviet aggression in Europe and elsewhere was on the increase. With memories of the Berlin Airlift still fresh and communist ideology seemingly in the ascendancy everywhere, US policy makers sought to determine what course the United States should follow in response to perceived Soviet aggression. A key strategy document outlined the United States response to the communist threat and was drafted in early Jan 1950 by the National Security Council (NSC). The resulting paper (NSC 68) aimed to define how the United States would respond to Soviet expansionist aims and also made predictions about the future nature of conflict between the superpowers in a bi-polar world post World War 2. While it was recognised that the main Soviet threat was most likely in Europe, NSC 68 recognised that the communist threat was global and would have to be countered. NSC 68 defined the United States' options as:

Option 1: Maintain current policy;

Option 2: Adopt an 'Isolationist' stance;

Option 3: Go to war with the Soviet Union;

Option 4: Fund and authorise a rapid build up of political, military and economic strength.[14]

NSC 68 painted a dire picture of Soviet intentions and recommended that Option 4 was the preferred course to chart. The principal author (Paul H. Nitze) proposed radical steps, many of which were politically highly sensitive. Key recommendations were that West Germany should be rearmed as a priority and that a policy of "Containment" be adopted. 'Containment' was defined as:

"...It is one which seeks by all means short of war to (1) block further expansion of Soviet power, (2) expose the falsities of Soviet pretensions, (3) induce a retraction of the Kremlin's control and influence, and (4) in general, so foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system that the Kremlin is brought at least to the point of modifying its behaviour to conform to generally accepted international standards"[15].

President Harry S. Truman was presented with the conclusions from NSC 68 in Apr 1950. Its findings placed Truman in a dilemma; although the United States still had many more nuclear weapons than the Soviet Union,[16]the United States could not afford the increase in conventional military spending and support to European nations proposed by the paper. The United States Congress had strongly opposed increased military spending in favour of more spending within the United States. A fierce debate thus raged in the United States as to how perceived Soviet aggression should be responded to.

United States policy towards the ROK was somewhat haphazard. As already mentioned, Acheson had publicly stated that the ROK was outside of the United States 'Defence Perimeter' and relations with Rhee were often difficult given his bellicose nature and frequent outbursts about reunifying

Korea by force. This prompted the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to press for remaining US troops to be withdrawn in order to concentrate on more important commitments elsewhere. The last US troops were withdrawn late in 1949, which again seemed to signal to Kim Il Sung and Stalin that the United States would not intervene in the event of an invasion of the ROK.

Meanwhile, the debate over the implications of NSC 68 continued to rage in Washington, with those in favour of increasing military spending gaining little traction in the face of harsh budget realities. The invasion of the ROK on 25 Jun 1950 was greeted with shock in Washington and no doubt a degree of satisfaction by those that had signposted the Soviet inspired communist threat. American policy was thus immediately polarised and global US Political objectives were quickly wedded to the idea of 'Containment'. The DPRK invasion of the ROK acted as an accelerant that ignited the United States' commitment to defending what it perceived as the free nations of the world.

Due to an ongoing Soviet boycott of the United Nations, the United States was able to secure the UN's approval for the use of force and quickly committed substantial forces in support of the United Nations Command (UNC) in order to restore ROK sovereign territory. With the support of the UN and the containment of DPRK forces at Pusan, many in the United States began to call for a more aggressive strategy to 'Rollback' communism. The United States implemented its 'Rollback' strategy in Korea after the successful landings at Inchon on 15 Sep 1950 had severed DPRK supply routes and seen communist forces retreat in disarray back over the 38th parallel. UN Security Council Resolutions 82 - 85 condemned DPRK actions <https://assignbuster.com/serving-the-political-objectives-of-the-principal-participants/>

and eventually gave UNC forces authority to proceed north across the 38th parallel with the express intent of removing Kim Il Sung and reunifying Korea as a nation state. What set out as an ideological stance taken in Washington to 'Rollback' communism was thus implemented in reality in Korea, with poor results after decisive Chinese intervention. While it will be debated later in this essay if the UNC advance precipitated China's entry into the conflict, it certainly was a contributory factor.

The United States was justified to seek UN approval to use force to restore ROK territorial integrity; 'Containment' was a valid political objective that justified the use of force in response to the perceived Soviet threat. The 'Rollback' strategy was (with hindsight) unjustifiable and did not warrant the use of force in a vain attempt to unify Korea. Overall, and despite the ambiguity of its outcome, the Korean War had important implications for American foreign policy. In the short-term, the conflict globalized the policy of 'containment' and was the impetus for vastly increased Defence spending and extensive US military deployments in Europe and elsewhere. The Korean War deepened the United States already combative relationship with the Soviet Union and effectively scuppered any possibility of cordial diplomatic relations with Communist China for twenty years. The outcome of the Korean War was satisfactory for the United States. Communist advances had been contained and the ROK preserved as a bulwark against communism in Asia. Korea also had a far ranging impact on US policy and the policy of containment was to be applied to South Vietnam with disastrous results.

China

In Apr 1949, the Chinese Civil War ended in the decisive defeat of the Chinese Nationalists. A newly unified China under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong was keen to assert much greater influence in the region and this was to be a critical factor for the duration of the Korean War. United States support for the remnants of the Chinese Nationalist regime in Taiwan continued to be a major source of friction between the United States and China and was an underlying theme that determined Chinese political and strategic objectives in the region. As a result of the United States overt support of the Nationalist regime and the lack of Chinese counters to US military strength (particularly Naval), Mao was keen to determine if there was an indirect means to confront the United States and perhaps even extract concessions over the future of the Nationalist redoubt in Taiwan.

China's decision to enter the Korean War was determined by Chinese leaders' interpretation of China's security interests and their judgment as to how China's security would be affected by entering the conflict. At this early juncture after the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War, the Chinese leadership was highly sensitive as to how China's stature, capability and willingness to defend its position were perceived by outsiders and particularly the West. China had suffered greatly at the hands of Great Britain and the USA and others during a prolonged period of foreign intervention in its affairs and Mao determined at an early stage that China would become involved in a Korean conflict if the situation dictated[17]. Once UN Forces crossed the 38th parallel in force and the 'Rollback' strategy was openly advocated by the United States, the Rubicon was clearly crossed for the Chinese leadership

and in particular Mao Zedong leaving them little choice but to act to defend its interests in the region. In essence, if all of Korea was occupied by UNC forces, then this would (in the eyes of the Chinese leadership) create a fatal danger to the fledgling Chinese revolution.

China's use of force to meet its strategic objectives was fully justified in the minds of the Chinese leadership. The sanctity of the Chinese revolution appeared to be under threat once 'Rollback' gained significant support in the UN. It can also be argued that Mao saw a fleeting opportunity for China to deal an embarrassing blow to UN Forces by committing large numbers of Chinese 'volunteers' at a decisive moment in the campaign. By committing Chinese forces to an ideological struggle such as Korea, Mao's reasoning can be assessed as sound; China would bolster its credibility within communist circles and perhaps emerge from the conflict as a beacon for other fledgling communist states so long as the west was prevented from securing success in Korea. Underlying much of Chinese strategic thought was the possibility that prolonged involvement in any Korean conflict had the potential to secure concessions from the United States over the future of Japan and crucially Taiwan. Chinese intransigence during the later stages of the Korean War can be attributed to not wishing to terminate the conflict until a more favourable situation had been achieved by communist forces and also Stalin's wish to prolong the conflict to keep the USA involved in a peripheral action.

DPRK Strategy and Political Objectives

DPRK strategy was relatively simple once the division of Korea became

permanent. Under the shrewd leadership of Kim Il Sung, the DPRK charted a <https://assignbuster.com/serving-the-political-objectives-of-the-principal-participants/>

course that played the Soviet Union and China off each other in order to serve the DPRK's best interests. Once any hope of a diplomatic solution had vanished to unify Korea, Kim Il Sung determined that a narrow window of opportunity existed for the military unification of Korea. Indeed, the DPRK's invasion of the ROK perhaps provides the best example of Clausewitz's dictum "...that war is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means"[18].

On 7 March 1949, while talking to Stalin in Moscow Kim Il Sung said: " We believe that the situation makes it necessary and possible to liberate the whole country through military means." The Soviet leader apparently disagreed, citing the military weakness of the North, the Soviet-USA agreement on the 38th parallel division and the possibility of American intervention if the DPRK intervened militarily in the ROK. Stalin added that only if the ROK/USA attacked Pyongyang could the DPRK try military reunification by launching a counterattack. " Then," the Kremlin chief explained, " your move will be understood and supported by everyone." [19] On 17 January 1950, Kim Il Sung complained to the Soviet ambassador Shtykov: " I can't sleep at night because I am thinking of the unification of the whole country. If the cause... is postponed, then I may lose the confidence of the Korean people." Kim Il Sung apparently requested permission to make a new visit to the USSR to receive " orders and permission" from Stalin for the offensive [20]. This is a key point; for Kim Il Sung, the war was as much about maintaining popular consent for his regime as it was for unifying Korea.

The DPRK was essentially justified in resorting to the use of force in its attempt to unify Korea. This is a contentious point of view, but it can be argued that as the Korean War was essentially a civil war, then once diplomatic means had been exhausted, the only way left to Sung was to exhort the Soviet Union and China to support a military endeavour to unify the Korean peninsula. It could also be argued that had the ROK not been supported by the United States, then the ideological and nationalist tensions in Korea would have played out after a period of internal wrangling. Korea would have likely emerged after the end of the Cold War as a stable, unified state that would have been open to capitalist influence (like many former Warsaw Pact states) and not the insular, paranoid autocracy that still persists. The outcomes of the Korean War essentially did not meet the primary aim of the DPRK to unify Korea, but did ensure the continued support and investment of the Soviet Union and China, much as the United States supported the ROK.

ROK Political and Strategic objectives

ROK strategy was again relatively simple. By continually agitating against the communist DPRK regime, Rhee hoped to draw the United States into a Korean Civil War in order to enable the unification of Korea by force. Many accounts of the time place the blame squarely on the DPRK for invading the ROK, but this is too simplistic. Rhee continually blustered that he would lead an ROK invasion of the DPRK to reunite Korea. On a visit with The US Secretary of State (John Foster Dulles) a reporter (William Mathews of the Arizona Daily Star) recorded that: " He [Rhee] is militantly for the unification of Korea. Openly says it must be brought about soon...Rhee pleads justice of

going into North country. Thinks it could succeed in a few days ...[I]f he can do it with our help, he will do it"[21]. Rhee was an ardent nationalist and was clearly set on reuniting Korea by any means, so long as he had the support of the United States to do so. ROK forces were responsible for repeated violations of the 38th parallel and ROK initiated artillery exchanges were "commonplace" from Spring 1949 onwards[22]. Continued United States military support was thus at times difficult to justify in the face of pressing commitments elsewhere and the Joint Chiefs of Staff finally withdrew all but a token force of advisors in late 1949[23].

The primary political objective of the ROK can thus be clearly identified as seeking to secure and maintain United States military, economic and political involvement in the ROK. In this, the Rhee regime was entirely successful as the Korean War precipitated massive United States military, economic and political support which extends to the present day. Indeed, the prolonged nature of the conflict served to ensure that the Korean conflict was centre stage of the Truman/Eisenhower Presidential Election. Rhee and his regime survived the war intact and the experience of the conflict had a direct influence on ROK politics for two generations with successive semi military dictatorships controlling ROK affairs.

The United Nations

Facing its sternest test, the United Nations had weathered a challenge, which, if unanswered, might have resulted in disaster and eventual disintegration. Under the U. N. flag, the original objective of the intervention in Korea-halting Communist aggression-had been successfully carried out and the independence of its foster child, the Republic of Korea, had been

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preserved. This practical demonstration of how the United Nations could function when peace was threatened greatly enhanced the prestige of the organization and established a precedent for future U. N. military action if the need should again arise.

The effort had not been given unanimous support by U. N. members, it is true, but twentyone nations had contributed forces of one kind or another to sustain the U. N. decision. Although many of these countries had supplied only small token units, the mere fact that they had participated at all was encouraging, since it indicated their belief in the U. N. and their willingness to put teeth in the enforcement provisions of its charter. The Korean War marked a real departure from the dismal experience of the League of Nations in this respect.

Conclusions