Some Lessons for Today from the Korean War

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ABSTRACT

The Korean War had an immense set of effects on the international system and a number of nations, primarily because of the interplay between the war and the historical context in which it occurred. Lessons include the importance of the historical context in a particular case since it undermines success in generalizing about the probable effects of seemingly similar events; the way even "small" wars can have a major impact; the need to be skeptical about suggestions that the U.S. significantly reduce its involvements in and efforts to manage regional security situations; the similarity between the Korean War and later forceful multilateral interventions for peace and security; and the need to be very cautious in offering predictions with high confidence about how a "limited" war with an Iran or North Korea will turn out.

Keywords: Forgotten War; Korean War and: bipolarity, Cold War militarization, US-China relations, deterrence; Korean War impact on: United States, Soviet Union, Japan, China, the two Koreas; Korean War and: regional security management, multilateral security management,

Introduction

It is particularly appropriate on the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War to look back at the war carefully. It has suffered from neglect, something that began not long after it ended. In various ways it has been largely forgotten, even by the latest generation of Koreans for whom it is no longer a self-defining memory, and is often referred to as "the Forgotten War."[1] In the U.S. there has been no recent surge in historical works revisiting the war, such as has been occurring with World War II. American movies about the war are rarely shown. It is at least better remembered in China, of course, where it is described as a Chinese victory, and in North and South Korea where the war was the seminal experience of their emergence as states. The neglect in the U.S. is unjustified, because the war was quite an important event, one of those very few events that can rightly be cited as a turning point in history. It had a huge impact on the international system and on the domestic affairs of several significant nations. Let me do my part to try to compensate a bit for that neglect.

I was asked to discuss the lessons for today that might be elicited from the war. Lessons are meant to be nuggets of wisdom that can assist us as we get on with our affairs, providing some guidance on how to proceed now. The trouble is that a major historical turning point is, by definition, a member of a uniquely important class of events, and it is normally not wise to draw lessons from such unusual circumstances. While the Korean War has important elements of what can be a broadly informative case study, doing an in-depth analysis in order to produce generalizations based on a single case is hardly wise. This article settles for attempting to highlight aspects of the war so as to indicate why they might periodically be useful to remember, and also stressing that the war and its impact might have turned out very differently, making for a rather different kind of world thereafter. Without the Korean War we might well have lived through something much less cold than the Cold War.

It is also worth emphasizing how the Korean War had a far greater impact than anyone at the time would have predicted, and that in part this was because it provided such a woeful parade of serious misperceptions and miscalculations.[2] As such it surely offers a lesson or two for today, but by telling us less about what we can learn about the Korean War that is pertinent now than instructing us in how dangerous it can be to be comfortably confident we know what we are doing.

The Importance of Context

The war had such a lengthy string of important results mainly due to the context within which it arose and was conducted. Hence the first

lesson we can draw from the war is that context can change almost everything. In other circumstances, especially much more ordinary ones, the outbreak of the war would likely have been considered a civil war in a peripheral place, a minor conflict of little importance, certainly not a conflict deserving of a massive international reaction. It was the shifting, still developing, Cold War context that made the Korean War so important for the U.S. and thus for several other governments. A number of facets of that context were particularly influential in turning the war into a seminal event. One was that the war erupted after a string of interrelated developments that were generating rising pressure on and within the American government for a strong reaction to an event like the North Korean attack. These developments included:

- The emergence of Soviet-style satellite governments in Eastern Europe after 1945;
- The first Soviet nuclear test in 1949;
- The establishment of NATO in 1949; and
- The triumph of communist forces in China (1949), followed shortly thereafter by a formal Sino-Soviet alliance (1950).

Pressure had been building in Washington to work harder to halt what seemed to be a rapid expansion of communist controlled territory and communist influence. And as a result of these developments the American government had begun drawing containment lines as a key part of its foreign policy thinking and actions, the central guide to which was the strategy of containment. There was, nevertheless, a growing sense in Washington in June 1950 that making this major adjustment in U.S. foreign policy was overdue and still incomplete. The Korean War therefore served as a huge catalyst to speed it up. And it was in this frame of mind that the attack was immediately perceived as exceedingly dangerous: here was the Soviet government seizing an opportunity to expand the Soviet bloc by using one of its satellites. Clearly, Moscow felt it was on a roll or riding on a high tide.

Another and related contextual element was that the U.S. was deep into trying to reformulate the military component of the containment strategy. That part of the strategy had not yet been nailed down, was still being considered and debated, and it was evident that making any major changes would be highly controversial. Even before the Korean War the conflict with the Soviet bloc had been generating rising concern that it would sooner or later lead to a major military confrontation, most likely in Europe. Because the Soviet government now had nuclear weapons, analysts concluded that it was bound to continue trying, even more than

it had in the past five years in Europe, to exploit its conventional military strength and that of the communist bloc to make major gains. With nuclear weapons in hand, it would now have less concern about and less respect for the American atomic bomb.

One result of this emerging perspective was a secret draft blueprint for an American/Western European military buildup: NSC-68. In suggesting what had to be done it gave the West's conventional military weaknesses particular attention. However, the proposed buildup was a very uncomfortable prospect and quite controversial; at the time NSC-68 was often described in the government as calling for politically impossible policies and expenditures. It was being mulled over rather dubiously when the war broke out, and the war promptly changed all that. The invasion and the fighting were widely taken as proof of both the NSC-68 view of the communists as poised, or soon ready, to attack almost anywhere and of the need to get better prepared militarily. Thus the general plan it provided, including a major military expansion, for how to try to deter communist bloc attacks and deal with them if they nevertheless occurred, was now endorsed and more or less implemented.

NATO was such an important part of the context because of the fact that President Truman and others around him felt strongly that the alliance, which had been created only through an elaborate and intense political effort in Europe and the U.S., would be undermined if the U.S. failed to defend a state elsewhere that it had nurtured into existence. Even if the U.S. had no official commitment to protect the ROK, the credibility of the American commitment to NATO in the eyes of the allies, even more than its enemies, was held to be at stake and that made the war in Korea of global significance to those policymakers.

Finally, a much broader contextual element was the way Truman and many others were naturally primed by some of the most seminal and notorious events of their lifetimes to refer to "lessons" they had learned which now seemed overwhelmingly relevant in 1950. The lessons had to do with the way the rise of major totalitarian states, the steady expansion of their territories and acquisition of satellites, and the failure of Western countries to stand up to all this in the 1930s had eventually been a terrible mistake. The Korean situation seemed all too much like that history being replayed. Suddenly, Korea was both "strategically" valuable and symbolically critical; as a result, assistance to it was deemed politically necessary.

Thus this initial lesson for today of the Korean War is that there is little that is intrinsically important about contemporary developments, such as in their dimensions, their location, even their prominence. Their importance is dependent on what they mean, and that meaning is very

much shaped by the observer's context. Thus the Korean War was surprisingly but readily seen at the time as extremely important, even though it is now often forgotten or only touched on in passing.

How Unexpected Consequences Can Flow From a "Little" War

The second lesson is how events that are taken to be very important can readily play a large role in then reshaping the context at that time so that the context then drives events thereafter in a very different direction. In this regard, it is astonishing how important the Korean War was and continues to be—its effects continue to reverberate today. The war demonstrated in detail how immense the impact on all concerned of even a relatively small or limited war can be and, when that turns out to be the case, how very unlikely it is that the impact will have been accurately anticipated. Here is a reasonable working list of the most notable effects of the Korean War.

First, with regard to the international environment, the Korean War cemented bipolarity in place. The dominance of two huge blocs led by two supposed superpowers was so striking and unusual that it was to eventually lead analysts to reshape the fundamental theory of international politics—political Realism—used by analysts and governments for some time, into Neorealism, which eventually dominated Cold War American academic and policy makers' thinking (aspects of it have outlasted the Cold War in some quarters). It shaped how we thought and taught on international politics. It was somewhat less influential when it came to U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. adopted the broad Realist/Neorealist perspective to fight the Cold War, matching a roughly realist Soviet perspective which had dominated Soviet foreign policy since the Bolshevik Revolution. Each superpower also added distinct additional elements from their ideologies. For the U.S. this eventually resulted in combining a realist approach with Wilsonianism, the conception of international politics applied ever since by Americans in relations with allies under which the alliances would be not just hard-nosed temporary deals born of national interests but growing communities of shared norms and values. That gave U.S. national security policy a somewhat schizophrenic character, turning its image of the Cold War into a contest between good and evil with the good side building a nonrealist community of states in a distinctly nonrealist fashion, while intensely realist behavior was reserved for competition with the communists or other realist-prone governments.

Since 9/11 the U.S. has, in important respects, replayed some of this history: the insistence that we are in a war, on a global scale, that calls for the presidential exercise of very unusual powers both at home and

abroad. Once again, we turned to the notion of a crusade against evil forces as the overarching conception of what we were up to in international affairs, combining a Wilsonian conception of our objectives with realist ways of carrying on the crusade.

Next, and certainly of lasting significance, the Korean War was directly responsible for or greatly speeded up the militarization of the Cold War, giving that conflict such a huge military dimension and emphasis. As indicated above, recent developments had brought key Americans and others to conclude that war was a growing possibility due to the intensity the Cold War had developed and that this required a major military buildup, but it is not clear (historians disagree) as to whether the buildup was inevitable.[3] The Cold War had been a sharp East-West political conflict, and while the possibility of a war had become a serious concern, outright fighting still seemed rather unlikely in view of everyone's need to continue recovering from World War II. The Korean War sharply altered this expectation. The North Korean attack was seen as indicating that the Soviet Union, directly or through its satellites, would readily use force to consolidate and expand its bloc and was prepared to pounce on any opportunity to do this that emerged. The Kremlin was even prepared to take the kinds of risks that could lead to a general war with the West. Washington had been expecting that under the cover of the NATO alliance, and with the aid of the Marshall Plan, the Western Europeans would gradually recover sufficiently to rearm and assume the responsibility of defending themselves. Now it seemed they would not necessarily have time to do that.

As a result, during the war itself the U.S. moved 5 divisions to Western Europe even as it entered into a major rearmament and was fighting in Korea. It strongly urged that its European allies similarly rearm, which they did. This massively enlarged the military dimension of the NATO alliance. In response, Soviet forces—which had never demobilized to the same extent—were considerably expanded in Eastern Europe and at home, as were the satellite nations' forces in Eastern Europe. From the Korean War onward Chinese forces would remain much larger and kept in a much higher state of readiness as well. And the two Koreas would eventually be maintaining some of the largest military forces in the world.

We distinctly remember how the Cold War featured the enormous (for peacetime) armed forces of two huge blocs facing each other at an unprecedented peacetime level of readiness and for an unheard of length of time. For nearly the entire Cold War thereafter each side operated as if it constantly faced the distinct possibility of a major attack, probably by surprise. More than any other development, it was the Korean War

that brought about this situation. Even George Kennan, who created the Western intellectual conception of the Cold War as an unavoidable political contest, and developed the core elements of American containment strategy for conducting it, did not envision the militarization that the Korean War; it was something he deeply regretted, and always resisted.[4]

Next, the Korean War stimulated the further multiplication of American alliances. The United States had deliberately avoided alliances since George Washington had laid that down as a core principle of American foreign policy, not compromising this until the 1947 Rio Treaty for the Americas that formalized the Monroe Doctrine and an alliance with the newly independent Philippines that same year when it became independent. Both seemed to involve places with little likelihood of a war in 1947. The creation of NATO in 1949 was therefore very controversial, a major departure. Now the policy of avoiding "entangling alliances" was thoroughly discarded. The Korean War was seen as demonstrating the folly of failing to practice deterrence via highly visible and official commitments. The war had occurred, it seemed, because the U.S. had not clearly indicated a vital national interest in South Korea thereby signaling it would fight to protect the ROK. (Of course, US officials had no idea this was the case until the war broke out; in seeing the ROK as worth fighting for, they surprised themselves as much as they did the North Koreans, Russians, and Chinese.) The political-diplomatic solution adopted by Washington was to use formal alliances to specify interests for which the U.S. would fight. During and not long after the Korean War the U.S. entered into alliances with Australia and New Zealand (1951), South Korea, Japan (1954), Taiwan, Thailand, and Pakistan. Soon the US would establish SEATO and CENTO as well (both eventually dissolved). Formal American alliances were supplemented with informal but alliance-like ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and South Vietnam. Eventually NATO would be enlarged and Sweden and Yugoslavia would be informally under NATO's extended deterrence as well.[5] NATO enlargement began by adding Greece and Turkey, which the U.S. proposed in 1951 in part as appreciation of their participation in the Korean War. In reaction, the Soviet Union eventually expanded its formal and informal alliance arrangements as well, in Europe and elsewhere.

A startling component of this expansion of alliances was the creation of several integrated alliance commands that were to be active in peacetime in developing preparations for warfare and were intended to take charge of any war that arose. Because of the Korean War and its demonstration that an attack could come at almost any time, NATO

developed an extensive political and military apparatus for planning and for almost instantaneous military action when necessary, involving an unprecedented peacetime level of cooperation/integration that included elaborate headquarters staffs, joint training exercises, substantial intelligence sharing, efforts to closely coordinate weapons procurements and defense budgets, and joint logistics arrangements. By the end of 1953 there were some 7 million NATO military personnel, under the Supreme Allied Commander at NATO headquarters in Paris.[6] Because of the Korean War a similar development eventually occurred in the U.S.-ROK alliance and for the same reason: fear of an attack almost out of the blue.

NATO's growth spurt after the Korean War also included the addition of West Germany. Thus the war had a good deal to do with German rearmament; in fact, while the war was in progress the U.S. was pressing hard for Western European rearmament while simultaneously insisting it would be impossible for the allies to offset the Soviet bloc's military strength without including West German forces.[7] No integrated and effective defense of Western Europe seemed possible without West Germany, the largest country in Europe (in population) NATO would be defending, and the U.S. got the other allies to accept it. While in June 1950 European NATO members had some 14 rather weak divisions and the US maintained two skeletal occupation divisions there, three years later there were 15 NATO divisions (6 American) in West Germany alone, and West Germany was about to rearm to add 12 more.[8]
The Soviet response was to object strenuously, then officially create the Warsaw Pact shortly after West Germany was admitted into NATO, and to rearm East Germany. In that way the Korean War made a major indirect contribution to hardening the division of Germany and Europe. In turn, that led to the series of crises over Berlin which, prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis, were the most nerve-wracking confrontations of the Cold War. The one Soviet alliance that came to have the same command arrangements as NATO or the Combined Forces Command in Korea was the Warsaw Pact.

The Korean War led, of course, to the freezing of Sino-American relations for over twenty years. There had been considerable debate in Washington about how to respond to Mao's triumph in China and his ensuing alliance with the Soviet Union. However, until China's entry into the War there was had been no American decision or intention to avoid relations with Beijing indefinitely.[9] But with the outbreak of the war, Truman ordered the 7th Fleet to protect Taiwan. This injected the U.S. into the Chinese civil war once again by providing protection for a rival claimant to the communist government as legitimate ruler of China.

Mao's government was naturally enraged, and his inclination was reinforced to pursue revolution in East Asia as opposed to giving overwhelming attention to domestic development. This tangle of events set off by the war was a major step in expanding the Cold War from being primarily a central European conflict into East Asia, soon into Southeast Asia, and ultimately to virtually everywhere else. For years the U.S.-China relationship remained one of the most dangerous in the world, with repeated crises that evoked U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons to protect Taiwan, and to other clashes over developments in Southeast Asia. As a result, the Korean War was a key step in the globalization of the Cold War. With the freezing of the situation in Europe after the building of the Berlin wall and the end of the related crisis, the Cold War was primarily a Third World affair thereafter.

The military impact of the Korean War went much further. On the eve of the Korean War the U.S. had a small nuclear arsenal, although the world's largest, and was pursuing deterrence in a broad, somewhat vague way. The war led the government into developing something much more elaborate. It helped generate a deep preoccupation with the credibility of U.S. deterrence threats, especially of the growing American alliance commitments because, as noted above, it was widely concluded that U.S. actions prior to the War had actually undermined American credibility and thus helped incite the North Korean invasion.

In addition, the Korean War had a major impact on American strategic plans because it was a fairly lengthy and costly conventional military conflict that featured human-wave attacks by the North Koreans and Chinese. This led to insistence, before the war had ended and during the Eisenhower Administration thereafter, that the U.S. deterrence posture should be explicitly designed to avoid another major ground war. It was said to play into the strength of communist governments that had endless manpower at their disposal and could accept heavy casualties without qualms about their citizens' objections.

The U.S. emphasis after the Korean War was therefore placed on deterrence by threats of a nuclear response, with plans to use nuclear weapons early in a future war either strategically—directly attacking the Soviet Union as the one responsible for any communist war either by starting it or getting a satellite to do so—or tactically, by readily using nuclear weapons on the battlefield. In particular, emphasis was placed on destroying a future opponent, particularly the Soviet Union or China, through a massive initial strategic nuclear attack (the strategy of "Massive Retaliation"). Therefore, the Korean War led directly to a new strategic approach that required and greatly stimulated a vast expansion in American nuclear weapons. The U.S. nuclear stockpile grew from a

few hundred at the outset of the war to roughly 19,000 by 1960. For strategic nuclear strikes the U.S. built and deployed some 2,000 strategic bombers and before the decade was over had begun also deploying intercontinental ballistic missiles as well as numerous shorter range missiles overseas that could reach the Soviet Union. What most characterized the Cold War was its array of immense nuclear forces facing each other for decades, many of the weapons maintained on high alert ready to go on very short notice, and the major states basing their deterrence ultimately on threats to inflict vast and quite indiscriminate death and destruction. This deterrence posture was eventually imitated on a roughly equivalent scale by the Soviet Union, and on a smaller scale by Britain, France, China, and other nuclear powers.[10]

As the previous point suggests, the Korean War was also a seminal event in promoting the development of deterrence theory. It was just after that war, and because of the deterrence concerns that came out of it, that the intellectual efforts began which culminated in the emergence of all the basic variants of deterrence thinking, and the preoccupation with keeping deterrence, especially nuclear deterrence, stable—i.e., keeping the Cold War from deteriorating into serious fighting not just like the Korean War but especially as world war. This meant using deterrence not only to prevent wars but, as another version of stability, to prevent wars from escalating to levels of massive destruction. Sustaining the stability of nuclear deterrence, and deterrence more broadly, became the major preoccupation of both deterrence theory and arms control.

In this connection, the Korean War had a major additional impact by demonstrating that sizable fighting could take place involving one or more nuclear-armed states from each bloc, with considerable participation by other bloc members via measures short of the use of nuclear weapons, such as economic assistance, military forces, suffering significant casualties, and bearing major expenses. This showed that escalation control was feasible, that a war within the Cold War framework could be "limited." In this way the Korean War also did much to establish what is now widely referred to as the "nuclear taboo," a striking feature of international politics every since.[11] That was a surprising development and directly contradicted the Eisenhower administration strategy of massive retaliation. The norm or taboo of nonuse was credited, in retrospect, with helping prevent escalation of the Korean War and with a major share of the responsibility for the nonuse of nuclear weapons ever since.

This was a controversial development. The Korean War initiated a continuing civil-military struggle in the U.S. over whether to prepare to fight limited wars for any length of time if necessary, even with the

prospect of results far short of victory, or to plan to use nuclear weapons as needed and to fight nuclear wars. Korea saw the first American war after World War II in which civilian leaders demonstrated they would settle for something short of seeking a decisive victory rather than turn to nuclear weapons. Some military leaders, such as General Douglas MacArthur, plus various civilian strategists and political figures have objected strongly over the years to this. The argument has repeatedly appeared in debates about other wars, broad strategic plans and postures, or even about what weapons to develop, and was a prominent feature of defense policy debates after the Vietnam War in particular.

The Korean War also supplied an early example of the complexities and difficulties of fighting wars with coalitions of allied and other forces, even if conducted under American leadership and with the U.S. providing the crucial forces.[12] The recurrence of the problem since then has been readily apparent and, just as in the Korean War, has led to extensive American efforts to find new ways to make fighting in multilateral coalitions smoother and more effective. It remains a central concern in American alliances today.

Finally, the Korean War had an immense impact because it was so indecisive. Some analysts (such as Edward Luttwak and Mohammed Ayoob) have argued that wars, however onerous, can at least have the virtue of settling important matters and should be given the chance to do so. That did not happen in Korea. The war did not establish who was to govern the Korean peninsula, nor determine the political and socioeconomic system for the peninsula. That has led to endless frictions, confrontations, and crises plus a few outright military clashes. It has mandated massive peacetime arming of both Koreas, resulting in additional huge costs for the sponsors of each Korean government and in development of nuclear weapons by North Korea. Any consistent collective security management of Northeast Asia has been prevented. In terms of a possible war, the peninsula has remained one of the world's most dangerous places, including the chance another war there could escalate into a much larger, more destructive conflict. Only the Middle East has rivaled the peninsula in offering such a consistent danger of interstate war and potential global instability so intensively for such a long time.

This danger has been the most crucial factor sustaining the close ties ever since between the U.S. and ROK, on the one hand, and Beijing and Pyongyang on the other. China has never been happy with the U.S.-ROK alliance and such a close presence of American military forces that was one result of the war. And the U.S. has been consistently unhappy with how China's close ties to the DPRK, rooted in the war, inhibit the

imposition of serious sanctions or compelling pressures on the North.

This list of the effects of the Korean War on the participants and international politics is incomplete but should suffice to show that it was very important. With that in mind, what else can we say about its lessons for today? Most of the "lessons" appear to have been absorbed later, although unevenly. Looking back at the Korean War reminds us we could have learned them sooner and more soundly.

Unexpected "Small Wars" Can Have a Very Serious Domestic Impact

The third lesson of the Korean War is that even a relatively limited war can have huge consequences via its domestic effects on the participants and other states and societies. For instance, it was the Korean War that established the modern practice of the President taking the U.S. into major combat without a declaration of war. As a result of that precedent there has not been an official U.S. declaration of war since 1941. The war also generated a presidential declaration of a state of national emergency instead under which the president assumed additional powers, a declaration which would not be cancelled until after the Vietnam War and which has been imitated several times. Temporary or permanent expansions in presidential powers have occurred in connection with every American war since and, despite efforts like the War Powers Act, the practice has never been seriously curtailed.

Along with those powers came, starting with the war, a tradition of U.S. limited wars tending to damage the careers of the presidents involved. This was something experienced by Presidents Truman, Johnson, Nixon, Clinton (in Somalia), and George W. Bush.[13] It is well on its way to happening again with Obama.

The Korean War was fought with draftees and was followed by installing a peacetime draft to provide for the ensuing very large standing forces, the first peacetime draft in U.S. history. The draft became a standard feature of young men's lives, with all of them having to register at age 18 and carry a draft card thereafter. It would last through the Vietnam War when it was replaced by the all-volunteer armed forces arrangement.

Rearmament, the war and the draft led to the U.S. entering into maintaining a vast peacetime military establishment, something which has continued down to today. This was also a radical departure from the past and had massive domestic repercussions. In the first years after the war the share of the GNP devoted to military and related matters was quite unprecedented in peacetime, and it absorbed close to 50 percent of the federal budget. One early uneasy reaction to this development was

Eisenhower's farewell address warning about the military-industrial-academic-scientific complex and its rising influence on public policy. This peacetime military establishment and related elements survived even the end of the Cold War.

The Soviet Union avoided direct participation in the Korean War, aside from some unannounced air battles with U.S. planes over Korea, but was seriously affected by it. The war helped push Moscow into a deep premature and excessive involvement in East Asian affairs, including having to devote sizable domestic resources to development of the eastern portion of the country. The emergence of the Sino-Soviet dispute shortly after the war would greatly stimulate this geographical extension of its political, economic, and military resources. This was a major contribution to the eventual exhaustion of the Soviet system which led to its collapse and the end of the Cold War.[14]

The impact of the Korean War was very dramatic in Japan, something sometimes forgotten. Japan's economy was given an enormous economic boost from the war, vastly enhancing a domestic recovery effort that had previously been unevenly successful so that it then dominated the making of modern Japan. The war led directly to a sharp escalation of what became the semi-permanent U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia as well as a boost to the US-Japan alliance. Both of those, in turn, provided Japan with the basis for adopting what has been termed the Yoshida Doctrine in which heavy concern about Japan's security concerns were largely set aside, under American protection, in favor of full exploitation of the economic stimulus and after that the open U.S. market. As a result, Japan raced away from its past into headlong development and almost frantic social change far more readily than would otherwise have been the case, to an extent matched by no other society and economy in the Cold War era.

Due to the war the U.S. military footprint in Japan also expanded greatly, and the situation in Korea has helped to keep it extensive. That military presence has made the U.S. commitment to protect Japan's security more real and reliable down to the present, and remains the cornerstone of Japan's national security policy. In effect, U.S. forces in Korea help to reassure Japan about its security while U.S. forces in Japan are mainly designed to fight another war if necessary in Korea. The U.S. forces are also a well known perennial irritant in Japanese politics and the Japan-U.S. alliance.

As for China, during the Korean War it was thrown into heavy dependence on the Soviet Union. What became the Sino-Soviet split was significantly provoked because the Soviet government was unable (and unwilling) to bear all the costs, particularly for extended nuclear

deterrence or aiding China to become a nuclear power, that their intimate association required. This Soviet deficiency, glaring during the Korean War, was never forgotten or forgiven in Beijing. It is also hard to imagine the PLA gaining and then retaining the level of influence it did in China for many years (reaching its culmination during the Cultural Revolution) if not for the huge boost it received from the Korean War and the ensuing poisoning of Sino-American relations and then Sino-Soviet relations.

Of course the war had an immense effect on South Korea domestically, particularly when it did not end the North Korean state and the North Korean threat. The ROK had considerable difficulty from the start in building a broad consensus as to who should govern its portion of the peninsula, making it an attractive target for Pyongyang in June 1950 in seeking to exploit its lack of political cohesion. Complaints about the Rhee regime continued to build after the war and resulted in a period of political unrest, military intervention and limited economic, social, and political progress. The war and the enduring threat had given the armed forces immense resources for intervening in or taking over the state and its political affairs. It would take a long time for the ROK state to become strong, viable, and able to generate rapid progress and national cohesion.

The North was less harmed by the war in this regard, rebounding rapidly and pulling well ahead of the South in industrial development. Survival cemented Kim Il Sung's regime in place and for a time gave it the resources to put down roots. But the ultimate impact of the war was to tie the legitimacy and stability of the regime to a Stalinist approach to national development and rule that eventually became outdated, linking North Korea to a failed community of states and ideas. One result was that in recent decades it has displayed some signs of a classic failed state itself.

However, it exemplifies a different kind of failed state. It has become so self-centered and out of step as to antagonize not only its standard enemies but even its major friends. The classic failed state cannot readily defend itself against outsiders and inside threats, cannot fully control its borders, and has a weak grip on its territory and population. This only marginally applies to the DPRK. What makes it an important variant of a failed state today is that it lacks legitimacy, precisely because the Korean War left the ROK in place. This is true in terms of its outmoded ideological roots, failure to compete economically and militarily with the ROK, and inability to adapt to what are now the dominant norms of state behavior. By forcing the North to compete with the ROK, the ultimate legacy of the Korean War to the North has been a

dearth of international legitimacy and support. It lacks any true supporters abroad, has few normal interactions with most of the world, and is unable to sustain itself without outside help.

The question now is how much longer this version of the failed-state problem will bedevil the international system. There are widespread objections to its nuclear weapons, and consistent fear that the North will collapse in into economic prostration and political disarray. But it is the real nature of North Korea's failed-state status—loss of legitimacy, normal international interactions, and foreign support—that drives its pursuit of nuclear weapons, exacerbating the nuclear proliferation problem, and leaves it in such a battered economic condition.

Beware of Failing to Sufficiently Attend to Regional Security Management

Here is a fourth lesson. A standard critique of American foreign policy, offered by both realists/neorealists and many liberal analysts and critics, is that the U.S. is overextended, too heavily involved in trying to manage regional security affairs in too many places. The Korean War should invite more caution about this. The U.S. did not initially consider the Korean situation important. It did not strive to stabilize that situation, having seemingly more important matters to attend to. When the U.S. plunged into the war, critics charged it was "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time." Eventually, Americans eventually felt that Korea was not important enough insist on a decisive outcome as a vital contribution to regional security management. The war ended with a truce, which seemed sensible at the time since it had gone on too long. But lack of an enduring settlement meant continuing intense political conflict and the constant threat of renewed fighting. There never seemed to be a good time to end the conflict and repair the regional security situation.

One reason for taking the Korean situation too lightly was a persistent tendency in many governments, particularly Washington, to see the regional security situation as an offshoot of the global one. With that in mind, in the Cold War the Korean conflict seemed beyond resolution because the international system could not be mobilized to do anything about it, and because global Cold War security considerations took priority. The conflict in Korea was because of the Cold War: the Cold War made settling it impossible. Once the Cold War ended the Korean situation might have been wrapped up relatively quickly, or so it seemed to analysts in the U.S., the ROK, and elsewhere in East Asia at the time. Instead, the earlier deficiencies in regional security management led to an inability to end the stalemate on the peninsula,

especially as both China and the U.S. now saw the North Korean problem as continuing to be an offshoot of the global security situation—in the form of the global nuclear proliferation problem for the U.S. and the Chinese fear of any precedent of blatantly suppressing a state's sovereignty no matter how great the provocation. Thus we get contrasting analyses: cooperative and effective regional security management is undermined by the Korean situation, and the Korean situation will not yield a solution because of the lack of effective security management. The chicken scrambles the egg and the egg poisons the chicken.

As the Korean situation illustrates, failures to manage regional security have generally incited global-level intrusions sooner or later. Realist analysts always expected that system-wide struggles for power and influence would extend as far as the capacities of the main contestants would permit: the global system and regional systems become intertwined. Now it seems clear that in a liberalist-dominated international system the same sort of international-system intrusions are occurring, because the flaunting or catastrophic failure of liberal values in a particular region is politically intolerable to the dominant liberal states (particularly their publics). Thus when North Korea insists that the U.S. and other Western states cease their hostility, it is asking for the impossible. And when the U.S. and others insist that North Korea accept liberal international norms, they are suggesting what to Pyongyang is intolerable. The same thing seems to be true of Iran these days, or Venezuela, or Zambia or Myanmar. It is now harder than ever to imagine a regional system becoming a quiet backwater, where terrible things go on but none of the major states and their societies cares. As a result these regional systems need attention.

Give Due Respect to the Necessity and Perils or Predicaments of Multilateral Security Management of Regional Security Affairs

The fifth lesson of the Korean War lies in the way that it featured the first use of the UN Security Council to authorize a major military action to sustain peace and security. In doing so it nearly killed off chances of doing that again until the Cold War ended—only the intervention in the Congo late in the Eisenhower Administration was a serious exception, and it was on a much smaller scale. Since the end of the Cold War only one similar (in design) military effort has occurred, in the Gulf War. That conflict might well have had the same effect if it had dragged on and drawn major powers in on the Iraqi side. Instead the war involved hardly any casualties for UN-authorized forces (some 148 battle deaths). Nevertheless, it has proven extremely difficult to get a suitable Security

Council consensus behind any major use of force since then, such as to halt nuclear proliferation or genocide. Darfur was the most egregious recent example.

The Korean War displayed all of what are now cited as well known difficulties associated with standard wars fought multilaterally by alliances or coalitions under the auspices of international organizations. There were major disagreements over strategy, over burden sharing, over how to conduct specific military operations, over the length of the effort to be mounted, over who was to make the crucial decisions, and over the autonomy to be granted to the military commanders. There was even the alarm allies displayed when the U.S. was contemplating the use of nuclear weapons, or the disagreement/uneasiness over whether UN forces should enter North Korea to decisively end the Korean problem. These are the same choices that had to be made in the Gulf War.[15]

Do Analyses Like the One in this Paper with Caution

A sixth and final lesson takes us back to the early point that in-depth analysis on the basis of a single case is hardly to be recommended. All that can be done is to highlight aspects of the case, suggest a few that may come up again in somewhat similar circumstances, and note ways things might have turned out very differently to show how contingent they can be, with variations offering very different implications as to what might have happened. Suppose the Russians vetoed any UN action in 1950 and the U.S. undertook its military effort with no Security Council sanction. It might therefore have decided never to work through the Security Council again, or not to bother intervening in situations like the one in Korea. Suppose the invasion of North Korea had been successful: China did not intervene, the regime was extinguished. How might the Cold War have developed? (The postwar situation would have looked much like the one after the Iraq War.) What if the failure of the North Korean invasion and the huge Chinese casualties led to a much more circumspect China and undermined Kim Il Sung's regime? In each case the nature of the international system might have been considerably different from the one that emerged in the next several decades. Indeed, we might have had something much less cold than the Cold War.

What is most suitable is to emphasize that the Korean War had far more effects and implications than anyone would have predicted. Therefore, it mainly highlights how unpredictable such situations in terms of their ultimate consequences. Does that drive us into insisting on caution? Not exactly. It is a strong suggestion for using caution in calculating what will happen, as opposed to what might.

Today the U.S. is operating in a period similar to the post- World War II years, when its military preeminence is unmatched, but when it came to experience two small wars—insurgencies—that have put its armed forces under great strain and made for major political difficulties at home and abroad. However, we have not experienced what would be the equivalent of the Korean War—a "small" war (with much higher casualties than either the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts) that drives such a comprehensive set of changes at home and in the international system, with consequences not fully anticipated or then readily comprehended for years. The Korean War offers valuable experience in this that must not be ignored when contemplating a possible war now with countries like Iran or North Korea.

Notes:

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[1] Spencer C. Tucker, "Why Study the Korean War?" *Magazine of History*, vol. 14, No. 3 (Spring, 2000), pp. 3-5. This issue contains seven articles on the war.

[2] These miscalculations included the American misjudgment that Korea was not very important, the mistaken judgment by key communist leaders that the U.S. would not fight for the ROK, the Russian failure to be at the crucial Security Council meeting on condemning the attack by the North and entering the war, the unnecessary protection then extended to Taiwan, the North Korean failure to expect the landing at Inchon, the mistake in having UN forces strive for unification, MacArthur's confidence that China would not intervene, Chinese leaders' mistaken confidence that Stalin would fully back their intervention, and Mao's belief, after early Chinese success in the intervention, that the UN forces could be driven off the peninsula.

[3] Leftist critics charged that the Truman administration seized on the Korean War to generate American and Western rearmament and thus fully establish the Cold War. In their view, the Korean War was suspiciously convenient for building the necessary political support.

[4] The Communist side was better prepared for this militarization and a high threat of war because Stalin had insisted this was how the socialism-capitalism struggle would go and that future wars between them were inevitable. However, the Kremlin was also surprised at how suddenly and rapidly the intensified military situation emerged.

[5] The U.S. privately offered Sweden protection; whether NATO officially did this as well privately is unclear but it was widely assumed. The same was true for Yugoslavia.

[6] William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 349-350

[7] Ibid., pp. 54-55.

[8] Ibid., pp. 349-50.

[9] Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 24, No. 4 (December, 1980), pp. 574-78.

[10] The U.S. eventually shifted to a more discriminating strategy, but the ultimate threat it posed continued to be massive destruction. Most nuclear powers have retained plans for massive, indiscriminate strikes down to the present, as their ultimate deterrence threats.

[11] Some prefer the term "tradition of nonuse" to taboo.

[12] The U.S. entered World War II abruptly and well after it started, so problems of coordination with allies under its leadership were understandable—the coordination had to be cobbled together on the run.

[13] Exceptions were Eisenhower and George H. W. Bush.

[14] The effort to sustain the Siberian/East Asian portion of Russia remains a serious burden and drain on its resources today.

[15] It is interesting that in these cases both escalating the war's objectives and adherence to the original mission had disappointing results for regional security and creating a more amenable state. North Korea and Iraq remained serious problems for the international system after each war.