

China's Strategic Lessons from the Korean War

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ABSTRACT

The lessons of the Korean War are fresh in Beijing's mind because the war remains the most significant, sizable, and sustained employment of force beyond China's borders in the modern era. The five enduring strategic lessons that China has drawn from the Korean War are: (1) not to fear the United States but take it seriously; (2) never again get sucked into a massive military intervention on the Korean peninsula, but if China does then the goal should be to fix the problem permanently; (3) give more attention to the desired outcome but to pay even greater attention to the process; (4) use all the levers of national power but do not rule out the use of force; (5) while times have changed, armed conflict is still possible in the 21st Century. Unlike in the Cold War era, China doesn't expect a major conflagration or world war. Nevertheless, while peace and development are the main trends of the early 21st Century, local wars are still possible. While peace and stability are the top priorities for China on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing will rule out the use of military force—or any other course of action—in defense of its vital interests.

Keywords: Korean War, China, United States, North Korea.

Introduction

In the sixty years since the outbreak of the Korean War much has changed in the world and Northeast Asia. The Cold War is over and the Soviet Union has disappeared. The war torn, poverty stricken countries of China, Japan and South Korea have boomed and are among the most prosperous societies and sizeable economies on the planet. In 2010, the state of exception is North Korea, which looms politically, economically, and militarily as an anachronism, with the Demilitarized Zone standing as a Cold War relic. Whereas six decades ago North Korea seemed to be riding an almost unstoppable wave of global communist revolution, today it is the perpetual problem child of Northeast Asia stuck in a time warp. I have dubbed it a “powder keg state”—a volatile country that has the potential to unravel or explode and destabilize an entire region.¹

While so much has changed in Northeast Asia, some things have remained the same—North Korea remains the immediate preoccupation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) today as it did sixty years ago. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 produced an unwelcome distraction for Beijing which until that point had been focused on completing the final major campaign of the Chinese Civil War—the invasion of Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had directed its armed forces to concentrate their efforts on an amphibious invasion of Taiwan—the last outpost of the Koumintang or Nationalist Party. However, the Korean conflict proved to be so much more than a distraction from Taiwan as President Harry S Truman’s response to North Korea’s attack across the 38th parallel included interposing the U.S. Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait. This signaled the commitment of the United States to the defense of the island effectively making Chinese seizure of Taiwan mission impossible.²

Thus, the Korean War is seared into China’s memory. Certainly, the conflict is a source of pride for many Chinese—tangible proof that their country could stand up to great power threats and intimidation and that the so-called Century of Humiliation was well and truly over. And yet the conflict is bittersweet because of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers who were killed, wounded, or traumatized by the three-years of bloody struggle on the Korean Peninsula.³ Moreover, the war’s toll was not just measured in human lives and suffering but also in terms of the opportunity cost to China. As noted above, the outbreak of the Korean conflict cost the CCP the opportunity to realize total victory over the KMT in the Chinese Civil War—a disappointment that haunts Beijing to this day.

So what are the lessons of the Korean War that remain relevant for China in the 21st Century? Below I identify five enduring strategic

lessons.

Lesson #1: The United States is not to be Feared (but Must be Taken Seriously)

Perhaps the most important lesson of the Korean War for China is that the United States is not a country to be feared. In an article published in the CCP's most prominent journal ten years ago to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Korean War two senior Chinese generals wrote: "The war shattered the myth that the United States was invincible."⁴ While the United States in 1950 was a superpower with overwhelming military might, including nuclear weapons that had been used against Japan to end the Second World War, China was not intimidated. Based on the clear asymmetry of military power—not to mention an overwhelming asymmetry of comprehensive national power—Beijing could very easily have determined that intervention in the Korean conflict was suicide. And yet, Chinese forces intervened. Considerable and prolonged deliberation over the merits of intervention went on in Beijing before Chinese leaders made the calculated gamble to intervene while doing what they could to limit the chances of escalation.⁵ This included no formal declaration of war by the PRC and official designation of the intervention force as "volunteers" and hence technically not the armed forces of the PRC. This fig leaf permitted China to claim plausible denial and lessen the likelihood of China becoming embroiled in a larger war with United States that could easily have spiraled into a global conflagration—World War Three.

In short, China refused to be intimidated by the daunting military might of the United States. But this did not mean that Beijing did not take Washington seriously. China's leaders realized that they would have to play to their own strengths to compensate for the dominant power of the United States. Indeed, Chinese soldiers learned many valuable operational lessons from three years of war fighting in Korea.⁶

Lesson #2: "Never Again (Unless . . .)"

The second lesson of the Korean War can be captured by the phrase "never again (unless) . . ." There are two variations of this. The first variation is that China should at all costs avoid the temptation or pressure to intervene again in Korea militarily. There is certainly strong sentiment among some in China today and a significant minority appears to believe that China's intervention in 1950 was a tragic mistake. But this absolutist position is not widespread because most Chinese continue to believe that the country's actions in 1950 were correct and that the conflict, despite resulting in terrible loss of life and economic cost, was a

“war of necessity.”⁷ Moreover, this display of commitment demonstrated China’s credibility as a power to be reckoned with. At the time Chinese officials publicly and repeatedly cautioned that China would not “stand idly by” as U.S. military forces marched further and further northward up the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, in subsequent decades top Chinese leaders have cited China’s warnings to the United States not to go north of the 38th Parallel as proof positive of Chinese credibility. For example, in May 1962 PRC Foreign Minister Chen Yi warned the United States against trying to invade the mainland by way of Taiwan. Chen stated: “At the time of the Korean War, we first warned against crossing the thirty-eighth parallel but America ignored the warning. The second time we warned again but America occupied Pyongyang. The third time we warned again but America aggressed close to the Yalu River and threatened the security of China.”⁸ Then, in 1984 paramount leader Deng Xiaoping cited Beijing’s warnings in 1950 as evidence that “China means what she says.”⁹ In the article commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Korean War noted earlier, two generals wrote:

The War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea was the first cry let out by new China after its birth; it gave vivid expression to the historical declaration “the Chinese people have stood up.” The war astonished the whole world and thoroughly changed China’s international image.

Then, quoting Mao Zedong, the two generals commented that the war showed that “the Chinese people...are not to be trifled with.”¹⁰

The second variation of this lesson is not that China should never intervene but rather that China should never again do so half-heartedly. “This time let’s finish the job” is the mantra. This does not necessarily mean blaming Mao or Peng Dehuai for not expelling U.S. forces from the entire peninsula and unifying Korea. At the time the CPV was weak and overextended; hence the military could not complete the task Mao had given to commander Peng. As a result North Korea remains a security headache for China in 2010 and there is little indication that this will change in the near future. The lesson of this experience is that next time if Chinese military forces intervene they should take care of the Korean problem once and for all. The logic would be something akin to the psychology behind President George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and go all the way to Baghdad. A powerful emotion influencing the president’s decisionmaking calculus was that he should take care of unfinished family business left over from his father’s administration. President George H. W. Bush had ended the 1991 Gulf

War after expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait and demurred from a full blown invasion of Iraq and/or toppling dictator Saddam Hussein.

So what might “finishing the job” mean in the context of a Chinese intervention in early 21st-century Korea? It might mean toppling the Kim family regime and/or it might mean occupying all or a good portion of North Korea for an extended period. It might also mean pursuing a peace treaty or some type of diplomatic agreement that would formally end the Korean War and conclusively resolve the border between the two Koreas and provide a mutually agreeable framework to govern relations between Pyongyang and Seoul.

Lesson #3: Pay More Attention to the Desired Outcome (but Pay Greater Attention to the Process)

Another lesson of the Korean War is that Beijing should give much more attention to the outcome it desires on the peninsula. Despite celebratory rhetoric by Chinese soldiers about the country’s great triumph in the Korean War, the reality was that the victory was not total. Indeed, the results—a divided and militarized Korea—were inconclusive and no peace treaty was ever signed. The armistice signed on July 27, 1953 was never intended to be more than a temporary agreement. And yet some six decades later it remains the framework for managing the security situation on the ground on the Korean peninsula. While Chinese soldiers withdrew from North Korea in 1958, U.S. forces remain in South Korea and Washington and Seoul continue to be staunch allies.

Thus, China’s immediate preoccupation in Northeast Asia remains, just as it was sixty years ago. This is hardly a desirable outcome for Beijing and certainly not what Mao and his generation would have envisioned more than half a century later. Frustration and anger with Pyongyang have risen in Beijing during the past decade. North Korea remains an economic basket case with little sign this will change any time soon. Moreover, North Korea remains a powder keg—a major security concern for China as well as the other countries of the region. In short, in spite of a considerable amount of Chinese blood spilled and continued infusions of Chinese treasure, the outcome has been extremely disappointing.

Beijing’s top priority in the early 21st century is peace and stability. The critical question is how this end state can best be achieved. China believes this can be achieved if North Korea “comes in from the Cold,” and since the mid-1990s, Beijing has worked hard to persuade Pyongyang to wholeheartedly pursue economic reform and moderate its hardline security policy. China also believes it is essential for the United States to improve its relations with North Korea. Beijing has concluded

that for North Korea to reorient its policies, Pyongyang must be reassured by Washington that the United States is not seeking North Korea's collapse. Hence, China has been actively seeking to facilitate a U.S.-North Korean rapprochement, most notably through the Six Party Talks launched in 2003.

Many analysts argue that China does not want Korean unification—and this may be Beijing's strong preference. However, what is more important is that whatever the outcome, the process should be peaceful. Indeed, what Beijing fears is a violent and tumultuous transition from a divided peninsula to a Korea of one.¹¹ So what China wants is a soft landing in North Korea. Ideally this will lead to a more stable and moderate regime that in turn will result in a significant lessening of tensions on the peninsula. Quite possible, however, is that the reforms will undermine the Pyongyang regime and lead to the end of North Korea. The ultimate outcome in this scenario would be unification.

Lesson # 4: Use All the Elements of National Power (but Don't Rule Out the Use of Military Force)

A fourth lesson of the Korean War is that military force should only be used as a last resort. And in the 21st century, unlike the situation in the 1950s, China has many levers at its disposal. Sixty years ago Beijing had virtually no diplomatic influence and certainly no economic clout. The only potent instrument of national power it possessed was its military—albeit a rudimentary and unsophisticated one. China achieved a hard fought stalemate on the field of battle. There was a diplomatic dimension but it was essentially limited to a small but important stage at the Demilitarized Zone. For many months Chinese negotiators doggedly played a weak hand of cards in truce talks at Panmunjom. Beijing skillfully coordinated propaganda and hard bargaining at the negotiating table as it simultaneously fought for every inch of real estate on the battlefield.¹²

Today, China has potent economic power—in the form of foreign aid, trade and investment—and is using it to exert influence across the Yalu.¹³ Moreover, China has considerable diplomatic influence—as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and with ambassador-level bilateral relations with every major power. Of course China does not utilize just one of these levers; rather it seeks to coordinate multiple instruments of national power. On North Korea, China currently is employing economic power, diplomatic initiatives—bilaterally with North Korea and with other powers as well as multilaterally in the Six Party Talks. Moreover, in venues like the United Nations Security Council, China has worked to moderate

criticism and weaken sanctions against North Korea. In the future China could possibly use military force in conjunction with diplomatic efforts so as to justify intervention in North Korea on humanitarian grounds (or apply any other combination of the instruments of national power).

Lesson # 5: Peace and Development are the Main Trends (but Limited War is Always Possible)

Despite the menu of options at China's disposal including non-military ones, the use of force by Beijing in a North Korea scenario should not be ruled out. While Beijing would prefer not to intervene militarily, it will not shirk from the use of force if it believes its vital national security interests are at stake.¹⁴ Beijing's tongue-in-cheek mantra might be "use force sparingly—repeat as often as needed."¹⁵ Chinese leaders, when reviewing their own record of military adventurism, have "never seen a war they didn't like." This does not mean China is bellicose or belligerent; rather, in hindsight, Beijing considers all instances of the use of force to have been both justified and successful.¹⁶ Even in cases where success was less than resounding, the judgment is that if China had not used force, then the situation would have only gotten worse.¹⁷ In addition Chinese military leaders have a high level of confidence in their ability at escalation control—in Chinese parlance "war control."¹⁸ Moreover, various Korea scenarios are consistent with currently envisioned conflict scenarios under the rubric of Limited War in Conditions of Informatization. Furthermore, these various scenarios are not inconsistent with greater attention to non-traditional security threats and Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) in recent years.¹⁹

Conclusion

The stakes in Korea were high for China in 1950 and the stakes are also high for China in 2010. Northeast Asia is China's doorstep and the Korean peninsula is the "threshold."²⁰ The lessons of the Korean War are fresh in Beijing's mind because it remains the most significant, sizable, and sustained employment of force beyond China's borders in the modern era.

There are five enduring strategic lessons that China seems to have gleaned from the Korean War. The first is not to fear the United States but take it seriously. The second lesson is to never again get sucked into a massive military intervention on the Korean peninsula, but if China does then the goal should be to fix the problem permanently. The third lesson is to give more attention to the desired outcome but to pay even greater attention to the process. The fourth lesson is to use all the levers

of national power but not to rule out the use of force. The fifth lesson is that while times have changed, armed conflict is still possible. Unlike in the Cold War era, China doesn't expect a major conflagration or world war. Nevertheless, while peace and development are the main trends of the early 21st century, local wars are still possible. While peace and stability are the top priorities for China in Northeast Asia, this does not mean that Beijing will rule out the use of military force—or any other course of action—in order to protect its vital interests in Korea.

Notes:

¹ Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel, *The Asia-Pacific in the U.S. National Security Calculus for a New Millennium* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2000), p. 24.

² Beijing attached virtually equal levels of alarm to the U.S. decisions to send reinforcements to the Korean Peninsula and interpose military forces between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland. See, for example, Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 174.

³ According to one official estimate, the Chinese People's Volunteers' "combat losses were more than 360,000 (including 130,000 wounded) and non-combat losses were more than 380,000." Zhang Aiping, Chief Compiler, *Zhongguo Renmin Jiefang Jun* [China's People's Liberation Army], vol. I, Contemporary China Series (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo Chubanshe, 1994), p. 137.

⁴ Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian, "Great Victory, Valuable Asset—Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Chinese People's Volunteers' Participation in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea," *Qiushi* (Seek Truth), No. 21 (November 1, 2000), internet version translated by Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) November 13, 2000.

⁵ For an analysis of the Chinese decision to intervene in Korea in late 1950, see Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, chapter 4.

⁶ See, for example, John J. Tkacik, Jr., "From Surprise to Stalemate: What the People's Liberation Army Learned from the Korean War," in Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *The Lessons of History: The PLA at 75* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), pp. 293-326.

⁷ See, for example, Bao Guojun, "Is It Truth or Falsehood—Military Historian Meng Zhaohui Refutes Article 'Truth' for Negating War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea," *Liaowang* No. 23 (5 June 2000) pp. 27-31 translated by FBIS. The term "war of necessity" was used by Professor Steven Goldstein. See his article in this volume: "Chinese Perspectives on the Origins of the Korean War: An Assessment at Sixty."

⁸ For the two quotations, see Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1975), pp. 212, 206.

⁹ This statement was made to reassure people that Beijing would abide by its commitment to maintain Hong Kong's autonomy for 50 years after it became a special autonomous region in 1997. See *Xinhua News Agency* June 28, 1984 in FBIS, *Daily Report: China*, June 29, 1984, p. E3.

¹⁰ Zhang and Chi, "Great Victory, Valuable Asset."

¹¹ China is much more worried about the process than the outcome. See, for example, Andrew Scobell, "Beijing's Headache over Kim Jong Il," *Far Eastern Economic Review* vol. 170, no. 6 (July/August 2007), p. 38.

¹² For a Chinese account of the negotiations written by a participant, see Chai Chengwen and Zhao Yongtian, *Banmendian tanpan* [Panmunjom Negotiations] (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 1989).

¹³ See, for example, Jae Cheol Kim, "The Political Economy of Chinese Investment in North Korea: A Preliminary Assessment," *Asian Survey*, vol. 46, No. 6 (December, 2006), pp. 898-916; Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, and Security* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2009), chapter 5.

¹⁴ Andrew Scobell, *Projecting Pyongyang: The Future of North Korea's Kim Jong Il Regime* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, March 2008), pp. 35-36.

¹⁵ Andrew Scobell, "Is there a Chinese Way of War?" *Parameters* XXXI: 1 (Spring 2005) p. 119.

¹⁶ Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell, and Larry M. Wortzel, "Introduction: The Lessons Learned by China's Soldiers," in Burkitt et al., eds, *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, July 2003), p. 7.

¹⁷ Thomas J. Christensen, "Windows and Wars: Trend Analysis and China's Use of Force," in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 50-85.

¹⁸ Lonnie D. Henley, "Evolving Chinese Concepts of War Control and Escalation Management," in Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *Shaping China's Security Environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2006).

¹⁹ Andrew Scobell, "Discourse in 3-D: The PLA's Evolving Doctrine, Circa 2009," in David Lai, Roy Kamphausen, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *The PLA at Home and Abroad* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic

Studies Institute, June 2010), pp. 99-133; and Andrew Scobell and Gregory Stevenson, "The PLA (Re) Discovers Nontraditional Security." Paper presented to the China Maritime Studies Institute Conference at the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, May 4-5, 2010.

²⁰ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, forthcoming 2011), chapter 5.