



A HOT COLD WAR: KOREA 1950 - -1953



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Keynote Speaker

Korea and the Cold War - then and now

Cameron Forbes

High up on the reviewing stand above Tiananmen Square, China's president Xi Jinping is clapping as the DongFeng or East Wind missile passes below. This DF-26 is the newest version of the carrier-killer anti-ballistic missile. It would be used in any conflict in the South China Sea. Clapping along with Xi at China's commemoration in September of the dead of World War II is Russia's Vladimir Putin. Standing next to Putin, clapping along too, is a woman in a bright yellow dress, conspicuous among the suited men and the uniformed generals. It is President Park Kumh E of South Korea. Back in Pyongyang, possibly sulking, is Park's great rival and China's ally, the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un. That's the Korean conundrum for you.

When World War II ended, with shattered countries, 50 million dead and the horror weapon, the atomic bomb, used for the first time, the Cold War began. The Soviet Union and the United States led the opposing ideological forces. After only five years, the Cold War spawned its hot war. Putin's predecessor, the monster Josef Stalin, and Xi's predecessor, Mao Zedong, who also had the blood of many millions on his hands, joined with Kim Jong Un's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, in an attempt to conquer South Korea. Park's father, Park Chung Hee, fought against North Korea in that war as a general.

After North Korean forces began their surprise blitzkrieg on June 25, 1950, the Korean peninsula became the giants' terrible playground, with armies surging down to its southern tip and up north to the border with China. Three years later, after a prolonged period that resembled World War I trench warfare, the last shot was fired where the first had been, somewhere more or less along the 38th Parallel.

Perhaps four million had died. The allied commander, General Douglas MacArthur, had suggested the war could be cut short by dropping atomic bombs on China. Truman, who had unleashed the nuclear holocaust on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, admitted there had been active consideration of the bomb's use. He wrote in his diary in December 1950: 'I've worked for peace for five years and six months and it looks like World War III is here.'

Yet the Korean conflict has been remembered mostly as the forgotten war. I shared in that general amnesia. My interest was aroused by a conversation with a friend, John Lewis, a documentary maker, about the Battle of Kapyong. I learnt that in mid-April, 1951, 3 RAR's commanding officer, Bruce Ferguson, invited the nearby Turkish Brigade to send representatives to the Australian base in the Kapyong Valley on April 25. There, along with the New Zealanders of the 16th Field Regiment, they would commemorate the 36th anniversary of Anzac Day. Diggers had already gathered wild azaleas from the high hills to weave wreaths; extra beer was of course laid in. Unfortunately the Chinese Fifth Offensive intervened.

Turks in Korea? Why? Kazim Celiker, a Turkish veteran I spoke to, hadn't known why when the brigade sailed off. He hadn't even known where Korea was. In November 1950, the Turkish Brigade, hindered by poor communications and faulty intelligence, went into their first action. It was a disaster.

Celiker recalled his commander shouting: 'We are surrounded. Protect yourself. Save yourself. Don't waste your bullets'. We took our *sung* (long knives) and fought the bayonets. Half our group died. We had gone to help the Americans. Nobody came to help us.

After the battles there we went back to base. We didn't have any more battles until the new year because we had so many casualties.

The Turks were in Korea because their Government, fearful of Soviet expansionism, wanted membership of NATO. Turkey thought a commitment of troops to the coalition being organised by the United States on behalf of the United Nations, would aid the cause. And it did. When Turkey became a full NATO member on February 15, 1952, a Turkish newspaper wrote: 'There has been a great and honourable share of the blood of our Korean heroes in the signatories' ink.'

Australians in Korea? Why?

Like Turkey, the Australian Government desperately wanted an alliance. It was concerned about communist Chinese expansion and feeling isolated on the southern fringes of Asia. The government wanted a formal alliance with the United States. In the dark days of World War II, as Australia faced the limits of the power of its protector, Britain, and the possibility of a Japanese invasion, Prime Minister John Curtin wrote: 'The Australian Government,

therefore, regards the Pacific struggle as primarily one in which the United States and Australia must have the fullest say in the direction of the democracies' fighting plan. Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.'

A decade later, when the Cold War turned hot in Korea, Australia's Minister for External Affairs, Percy Spender, saw a golden opportunity to press America for a security pact. Only five days after the North Korean invasion, Australia was delighted to send General MacArthur our 77 squadron and the Mustang fighters he wanted. When the appeal went out for ground troops, Spender cabled Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who was overseas: 'Time is running out in Korea and if we refrain from giving any further aid, we may lose an opportunity for cementing friendship with the US which may not easily present itself again'.

Spender, moved with unseemly haste to get the commitment of Australian ground troops. On July 26, Robert Menzies was safely in his cabin on the Queen Mary on the high seas between Britain and America. Menzies was doubtful about a Korean involvement. He expected confrontation with the Soviet Union in Europe. With Menzies out of contact, it was the perfect time for Spender to push the announcement that day of the commitment. In September, with 3 RAR preparing for the short voyage from Japan to Korea, Spender made what was to be a courtesy call on President Truman. He pressed his case. Truman was sympathetic to the proposal of a pact. An artillery captain in World War I, he spoke of his admiration for Australian soldiers and, to Spender's delight, made it clear he would overrule State Department reluctance.

When the draft of the ANZUS Treaty was initialled in February, 1951, Menzies, a convert, toasted Spender in his best cognac.

By then Australian soldiers, like the Turks, were paying a blood price for a treaty.

The Korean War was the product of ideology, nationalism, colonialism, the machinations of dictators and of geography. The peninsula runs from the huge mass of China to a 100-kilometre strait. Japan, on the other side, used to describe Korea as a dagger pointing to its heart. Over the centuries, there were periods of Korean unity and independence and a blossoming of the distinctive culture.

In the 7th Century, astronomers built the first observatory in the Far East; in the 13th century, perhaps 200 years before Gutenberg used his printing press in Germany, Koreans had

developed moveable metal type. However Korea lived under the shadow of China and threat from Japan. In 1592, the Japanese invaded. They were barbaric, as they would be in later wars, stealing national treasures, sending the ears and noses of 38,000 slain Korean soldiers back to Japan as trophies and ordering the living to speak Japanese and follow Japanese customs. Then, in 1597, one of Korea's national heroes, Admiral Yi Sun-Sin, sailing an iron-plated turtle ship, led a fleet against the Japanese navy, destroying 450 of their 500 ships. The Korean culture revived but again came under existential threat from Japan last century. Driven by militarism, Japan defeated first Chinese then Russian forces and in 1910 annexed Korea. In reaction to pro-independence uprisings, Japan attempted to exterminate Korea as a nation, making the culture illegal and banning the teaching of the Korean language and history in schools.

With the defeat of Japan in World War II, independence and unity seemed at hand but the Cold War froze that process. In 1946, with many nations in ruins, the grand alliance of America, Russia and Britain was shattered. Stalin saw no possibility of a peaceful international order: he said communism was in conflict with capitalism, monopoly and imperialism. Winston Churchill, who was rewarded by the British nation for his war heroics by being thrown out of office, took up Stalin's gauntlet. He travelled by train with Harry Truman to a small college in the President's home state, Missouri, sipping whisky and playing poker. He was on his way to deliver a speech he called *The Sinews of Peace*, in which he would call on America to lead the fight against war and tyranny. He began by saying he had no official mission or status of any kind, that he spoke only for himself. Then he caught the world's attention, saying: From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Police governments are prevailing in nearly every case. There is no true democracy.

On the other side of the world there was another Cold War dividing line, across the Korean peninsula. When America and the Soviet were still wartime allies, Washington had urged Stalin to join the war against Japan. With the war nearing its end, the Red Army was sweeping down Korea and Washington, worried about Soviet power and penetration in the region, wanted it to stop. On August 14, 1945, the night of the Japanese surrender, two America colonels sat in a small room, examining an old National Geographic map of the peninsula. They wanted to find a line more or less midpoint to suggest as a division between the Soviet and American spheres. One of the colonels, Dean Rusk, who would later serve as Secretary of State under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, described the decision, as he put it,

of two tired colonels, working late at night, as fateful, and making no sense strategically or geographically. There was no east-west physical barrier. Korea's rugged mountain spine ran north-south. In desperation, the colonels chose one of those phantom lines that circle the earth: the 38th parallel. The colonels' line cut through more than 75 streams and 12 rivers, intersected many high ridges, crossed 181 small cart tracks, 104 country roads, 15 provincial all-weather roads, eight better class highways and six north-south railways. To American relief, the Red Army did stop at the parallel, but the Soviet Union constructed there an economic and political iron curtain in Asia. It divided a nation which once had been united and independent. It divided families.

For Koreans on both sides of the parallel, it was a bitter disappointment. In 1943, as the tide of war turned against the Japanese, Franklin Roosevelt, Churchill and China's Chiang Kai-shek had met in Cairo to discuss strategies and the eventual freeing of captive territories. One clause in their declaration said: 'The aforesaid Great Powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course they shall be free and independent.'

'In due course' was not good enough for the leaders of the north and the south. While the weary patrons, America and the Soviets, had withdrawn the bulk of their troops by 1948, Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee, both ultranationalists and both authoritarians who used terror and violence to build power, were determined that there would be reunification by force. There were frequent clashes along the border.

In February 1949, Rhee claimed that his troops could defeat North Korea within two weeks and by October he was promising that Pyongyang, the capital, would be taken in three days.

For his part, Kim Il Sung was pestering Stalin for a nod of approval and the needed military support, prompting a firm Politburo resolution in September 1949 that 'a military attack against the South would be ill-timed and therefore, from a military point of view, impermissible'. The Soviets preferred the nurturing of a people's uprising in the South. Kim persisted, at a secret meeting telling Stalin the North Korean communists would have victory within two days.

Because of the declassification by the Kremlin in the 1990s of documents relating to the Korean War, we now know that Stalin, under his pseudonym Filipov, sent a message to Mao supporting the North's move towards reunification 'in light of the changed international

situation' but that, in the end, the question should be decided by our Chinese and Korean comrades.

Stalin was, not to put too fine a point on it, Machiavellian. He had had little faith in Mao and his peasant-based revolution. He had praised Mao's opponent Chiang Kai-shek as selfless and a patriot and had urged Mao to form a united front with him. Mao declined and took his Long March to victory. In 1942, according to legend, an old peasant watching the dawn had written a song

The East is red, the sun rises.

In China a Mao Zedong is born.

He seeks the people's happiness.

He is the people's great saviour

Stalin thought there was room for only one sun in the communist sky. It would have suited him if Mao's forces were mauled in Korea and Mao himself diminished.

Mao went to Moscow in December 1949, joining pilgrims from the communist world for the grand celebration of Stalin's 70th birthday. Mao sulked in private but grovelled in public. It was decided there should be a division of revolutionary labour: the Soviet Union would remain the centre of international proletarian revolution while China's main duty would be promotion of the Eastern Revolution.

When Stalin had written to Mao about the 'changed international situation', approving adventurism by North Korea, he would have had in mind, among other things, first the Soviet testing of its own atom bomb in September 1949 and second an explosive speech by the American Secretary of State Dean Acheson in January 1950. Acheson spoke at the National Press Club partly as a counter-attack against conservative critics who had charged the democrats with losing China when in October 1949 Mao had stood on the balcony of the Gate of Heavenly peace and proclaimed the Peoples Republic of China. Acheson also spoke of military security, America's vital interests in the Pacific and the drawing of a defence line. 'This defensive perimeter,' he said, 'runs along the Aleutians to Japan and then goes to the Ryukyus. The defensive perimeter runs from the Ryukyus to the Philippines.'

Stalin and Mao, in Moscow negotiating their Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, would not have needed an atlas to know that America's declared defensive perimeter did not take in the Korea peninsula. Perhaps they regarded this as a green light.

Acheson had made a serious strategic misstep, though he had raised the possibility of United Nations intervention if countries beyond America's defensive perimeter were attacked. And this is where Stalin in turn blundered. The day after Acheson's speech, he ordered the Soviet delegate to the United Nations Security Council to walk out. It was a boycott against the presence of the Nationalist Chinese representative. Only hours after Washington received a cable from its South Korean ambassador of the launching of an all-out offensive by the north against the south, it asked for and got a Security Council meeting which condemned the invasion. Two days later Washington sought a resolution authorising an armed response. The Soviet chair was empty. There could be no veto, and America began cobbling together a strange coalition: along with the old enemies, Turks, Australians and New Zealanders, there were Dutch, Thais, Columbians and even a battalion from the ranks of the Imperial Guard of Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie, who believed in the role of the United Nations.

As America mobilised the coalition, the North Koreans overran Seoul and pushed the South Korean forces down the peninsula. They struggled, with the aid of a small American task force, to keep a toe-hold around the port city of Pusan, in the south-east. Enter General Douglas MacArthur, victor in the Pacific War, with his strategic brilliance, giant ego and flawed genius. MacArthur had been in Tokyo, overseeing the building of a new Japan from its war ruins. He took command of the coalition in Korea and began planning Operation Chromite, an amphibious landing half-way up the peninsula at Inchon, Seoul's port, on September 15, 1950. He would then strike inland to slice the North's supply lines. Senior military people shook their heads: there were no beaches in the landing area, just mud flats, there was a tidal range of around nine metres and there would surely be heavy defences. But MacArthur would not be denied and MacArthur was triumphant as he observed the landing. The pity is he overreached. He wanted to be the father of a united Korea. He wanted the war to end far to the north of the 38th parallel, on the banks of the Yalu River, the border between North Korea and China.

China had sent signals and given specific warnings that they would not tolerate this, that they would react. MacArthur's frequent boast was that he understood the oriental mind – though

he had never dined with an oriental. So when he flew to Wake Island for a meeting on October 15 with Harry Truman, he had comforting words for the President.

What are the chances of Chinese or Soviet intervention? Truman asked.

Very little, the general replied. We no longer fear their intervention ... if the Chinese did try to get down to Pyongyang, there would be the greatest slaughter.

What neither the General nor the President knew was that the Chinese were already in Korea. The day before, October 14, the vanguard of 300,000 Chinese had crossed the Yalu River and hidden in the mountain spine. The war would take a savage turn; the serious killing would begin.

You will hear today of land and sea battles involving Australia. You will hear from the wonderful surviving veterans.

I want to talk briefly about two of the millions of dead in the Cold War's hot war.

In Heochang County, North Korea, in the Cemetery of the Heroes of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army is the grave of a soldier who was 28 when he was killed. Mao Anying was a child of the Communist Revolution and the son of the Great Helmsman, Mao Zedong. Anying's mother, Yang Kaohui, was an early member of the communist party. She was left with her two sons in the Nationalist city of Changsa when Mao went into the mountains with the guerrillas. After a failed communist attack on Changsa, Yang was arrested and she refused to denounce Mao. Perhaps Anying witnessed her torture and execution.

Mao's sons were smuggled to Shanghai. In a country ravage by war, they sometimes lived on the streets, selling newspapers and scavenging for food. Eventually the party took them under its wing and Anying spent the war years in Moscow. He went into North Korea with the first wave of Chinese volunteers and only five weeks later, on November 24, was killed in an American air strike on the base of Mao's old comrade, General Peng Dehuai. The news was kept from Mao for three months. When the family asked him to bring Anying's body home, he refused. 'Martyrs can be buried anywhere,' he said.

In Pusan, South Korea, in the military cemetery, is the grave of an Australian soldier who was 25 when he was killed. Denis O'Brien was a Catholic who grew up to be a socialist, an anti-communist and searcher for a cause. During World War II, he somehow managed to enlist in the Australian Army, aged 15 years and six months. He fought along the Kokoda

trail and in Borneo. When the Australian Government called for volunteers for Korea, he closed his one-teacher school and went. Wounded and repatriated to Australia, he returned to Korea and his digger mates.

On October 19, the eve of the Battle of Maryang San, they sat round a fire and sang an old soldiers' song with the chorus

Stand to you glasses steady,

It's all we have left to prize,

Let's drink to the dead already

And three cheers for the next man to die.

That would be Denis O'Brien. He had told his mate Keith Langdon a week before that he would be killed in the next action. Three days before he talked with the Catholic chaplain Father Joe Phillips about his death, made his confession and took communion. At Maryang San, he was lead Bren gunner in his section when the fog lifted and a Chinese soldier shot him in the head.

Mao Anying and Denis O'Brien lost their lives, along with millions of others and there were no victors in this war, and no peace. It ended in stalemate and an armistice.

The Korean peninsula has the world's highest concentration of military personal and for more than six decades it has been a tinderbox, threatening another hot war.

In the north Kim Jong Un, the third of his dynasty, continues the family tradition of dictatorship and of being predictably unpredictable. The Kims have rattled sabres – and at times used them – to gain attention and concessions. When Kim Jong-Il died in 2011, there was speculation that Kim Jong Un would be the creature of the old inner circle. Not so. He has been even more brutal than his father and grandfather, executing at least 70 generals and high officials, including his own uncle. The North Korean elite owe him both their good lives and their lives. The country can now feed its own people and the regime has given farmers the right to keep up to 60 percent of the profit of their crops. But if there is some economic progress and freedom, Kim retains an iron grip on the society. The gulags, where so-called reform through labour is practised, are brutal places. Kim demands from everyone obedience and adoration.

In the south, democracy is robust, as Park Kumh E is currently learning. Park, who has been named the most powerful woman in East Asia, had early lessons in the fragility of power. She became first lady at 22 when her mother was killed by an assassin's bullet meant for her father. Her father was assassinated five years later in 1979. A military dictator, he had blocked South Korea's path to democracy in the 1970s. During her presidential election campaign Park Numh E apologised for her father's abuses of human rights but now South Koreans are taking to the streets as they often have, this time over the Government's plan to ban all current history text books and replace them with one titled 'The Correct Textbook of History'. This is widely regarded as revisionist and an attempt to whitewash her father's regime.

But if South Koreans remain fierce in defence of democracy, and an old generation, many separated for decades from their families, want reunification, some analysts think much of the younger generation is losing interest in the question and is indifferent to North Korea. Their concern is with the economic now. The president has a constitutional obligation to seek peaceful reunification but that, in the reign of the Kims, is a fantasy.

North Korea, however, remains a cold and uncomfortable fact of life. It is highly unlikely that the Kim regime would deliberately start a hot war but there is the danger of miscalculation in the Peninsula's cold war. Kim's artillery could devastate Seoul in minutes and the North technically has the atomic bomb, with weapons-grade plutonium to build six, though not the missiles to deliver them. A hot war would mean disaster for the two Koreas. A nuclear war would be a catastrophe for the wider region.