

Korean War: Combat for the Sake of Losses (April 11, 1951)

Abstract

This article in *Der Spiegel*, a West German weekly magazine, presaged the two-year stalemate that the Korean War would become in July of 1951. From July of that year to July 1953, fighting continued (though nearly no territory was exchanged) as both sides negotiated. Both Koreas were willing to continue the war to its bloody end, but the patrons of both sides (China, the USSR, the United States, and the United Nations) were not. The preceding twelve months of fighting, and the “combat for the sake of losses” [Schlacht um Verluste] that the war had become convinced all patrons involved that seeking a total victory in Korea was no longer in any of their national interests. Material costs and deaths had risen to heights that they considered unsustainable, and they feared that the war could escalate into a wider, more global conflict. They made it clear to both Koreas that their continued military, economic, and diplomatic support rested on their willingness to conduct truce talks and bring the war to a close.

Source

As the United Nations forces in Korea roll over the 38th parallel for the third time, neither the generals in charge nor the politicians know how the war will continue or how it will end. The UN diplomats speak hesitantly of new attempts at communication with Mao Tse-tung.

And once again, MacArthur hazarded a prediction. If he was given a free hand, “the United Nations could easily wipe out the Chinese Communists.” In this case, even the Soviet Union would not dare to intervene.

“For the first time in my military career, I find myself in a war without any specific objectives,” General MacArthur complained to the British Lieutenant-General H. G. Martin, military correspondent of the London newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*.

He was referring here to the cautionary pronouncements made by (primarily British) politicians with respect to a renewed crossing of the demarcation line. He declared in response that the true goal of a troop commander in war was the destruction of enemy forces. This apparently does not apply in the case of Korea, as the UN forces are hemmed in by a whole range of “artificial conditions” (such as the ban on bombing Manchurian supply bases). MacArthur believes that there can be no substitute for victory as a means to peace. The range of artificial conditions are still in effect, as there is still unswerving hope in Lake Success that a ceasefire will be reached. The goal of the former “police action,” it is thought, namely the defense against North Korean aggression, has now been achieved once again.

“The psychologically propitious moment has arisen to speak of peace in Korea,” declared Warren Austin, the chief US delegate to the UN.

In other words, a draw. By this he means a clear draw in which combat operations are deadlocked. Neither of the opponents has a decisive strategic advantage anymore.

At Tokyo headquarters, this hopeless situation is referred to as “fluctuating stagnation.”

This means:

— The war cannot be decided even if either of the adversaries substantially strengthens its forces (as the Communists are now doing in central North Korea, where the latest estimates indicate 900,000 troops, including operational reserves, are being concentrated). The large-scale waves of attack by the Communists have foundered against the firepower of the better equipped Americans.

— A new Red general offensive (which Tokyo predicts for early May) could, at most, drive UN forces all the way back to the heights of Taegu. The UN forces would inflict heavy casualties on the advancing Communist infantry during the course of their disengagement through mobile counterattacks, surprise fire, and paratrooper operations directed at the enemy's rear line.

An essential plus for the UN is its absolute air superiority. US fighter pilots could cut the Reds' lengthening supply lines to ribbons with rolling low-level attacks, just as they have done for the past three months.

At best, MacArthur himself could advance his offensive to the bottleneck of Korea (the narrowest part of the peninsula), if permission is not forthcoming to attack the Chinese supply "sanctuary" in Manchuria. Because he has not received this permission, he has to establish mobile operations between the MacArthur line in the north (where he had intended to stop last year before deciding on the fatal advance to the Yalu River) and Taegu in the south. The only purpose of this strategy would be to try to wear down the enemy forces, in other words, combat for the sake of losses.

This, however, would also result in 6,000 to 7,000 Americans casualties each month (not counting South Korean casualties, which so far reportedly total 230,000 compared to a total of 60,000 American deaths).

Meanwhile, American elite tank battalions are slowly making their way further north. This is in compliance with the orders stipulating the "security requirements of UN forces," which Secretary of Defense Marshall has cited as the reason for crossing the 38th parallel.

Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, made headlines with his ominous assertion that "non-Chinese troops" were being amassed at the Manchurian border. The Soviets regarded this as an affront. The TASS news agency issued an angry official denial. Even US Army intelligence could not confirm Rayburn's report, however. The speculation in Washington is that Rayburn hoped to rouse the American public out of its apathy toward the Korean War.

In the meantime, Nasrollah Entezam, chairman of the UN mediation committee, made a cautious request to Peking. He wanted to know if he was correct in assuming that Peking's failure to respond as yet to previous UN cease-fire offers was a result of the Chinese government's need for more time to consider them. So far, he has not received an answer.

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