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Why History Proves a War Between China and America Would Be a Total Disaster

Robert Farley

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Remember the Korean War?

In November 1950, China and the United States went to war. Thirty-six thousand Americans died, along with upwards of a quarter million Chinese, and half a million or more Koreans. If the United States was deeply surprised to find itself at war with the People's Republic of China, a country that hadn't even existed the year before, it was even more surprised to find itself losing that war. The opening Chinese offensive, launched from deep within North Korea, took U.S. forces by complete operational surprise. The U.S.-led United Nations offensive into North Korea was thrown back, with the U.S. Army handed its worst defeat since the American Civil War [3].

The legacies of this war remain deep, complex and underexamined. Memory of the Korean War in the United States is obscured by the looming shadows of World War II and Vietnam. China remembers the conflict differently, but China's position in the world has changed in deep and fundamental ways since the 1950s. Still, as we consider the potential for future conflict between China and the United States [4], we should try to wring what lessons we can from the first Sino-American war.

Initiation:

In early 1950, the politics of the Cold War had not yet solidified around a pair of mutually hostile blocks. Nevertheless, the contours were visible; the Soviets had spent several years consolidating control of Eastern Europe, and the Chinese Communist Party had ridden the victories of the People's Liberation Army to power in Beijing. The stage was set for a zero-sum interpretation of the global struggle between Communist and non-Communist powers. It was just such an interpretation that dominated Washington's thinking as North Korean forces escalated the Korean civil war with a massive invasion across the 38th parallel.

Inside the United States, tension over the collapse of Nationalist China remained high. The Nationalist government possessed an extremely effective public-relations machine in the United States, built around the Soong family's relationship with Henry Luce. This influential domestic lobby helped push the United States towards both intervention and escalation, while at the same time undercutting the advice of experts who offered words of caution about Beijing's capabilities and interests.

The initial Chinese victories in late fall of 1950 resulted from a colossal intelligence failure on the part of the United States. These failures ran the gamut from political, to strategic, to operational, to tactical. The politicization of American expertise on China following the establishment of the PRC meant that U.S. policy makers struggled to understand Chinese messages. The United States also misunderstood the complex relationship between Moscow, Beijing and Pyongyang, treating the group as unitary actor without appreciating the serious political differences between the countries.

On an operational level, advancing U.S. forces paid little heed to warnings of Chinese intervention. The United States failed to understand the importance of the North Korean buffer to Beijing, failed to detect Chinese preparations for intervention, failed to detect Chinese soldiers operating in North Korea and failed to understand the overall strength of the Chinese forces. This

lack of caution stemmed from several sources. The U.S. military, having had experience with Chinese Nationalist forces during World War II, had little respect for the capabilities of the PLA, especially outside of Chinese borders. Americans overrated the importance of air superiority at the tactical and operational level, not to mention the relevance of nuclear weapons at the strategic level.

Conduct:

The People's Liberation Army appreciated the significance of U.S. air superiority over the battlefield, as well as the effectiveness of U.S. armor and artillery. The PLA (or PVA, as the expeditionary force in North Korea was dubbed) attempted to fight with the hybrid insurgent tactics that it had used to prevail in the Chinese Civil War. This involved using light infantry formations, designed to move and attack at night, in order to avoid U.S. airpower and concentrated American firepower. These tactics allowed the PLA to surprise U.S. forces, which were uncertain of the magnitude of Chinese intervention until it was too late to do anything but retreat.

Similarly, the United States fought with the tactics (and often the weapons) that it had used in World War II. Although North Korean armor and artillery had outmatched unprepared U.S. ground forces in the opening weeks of the war, by the time of the Chinese counteroffensive, the United States was fielding mobile, armored forces and employing combined arms tactics. These weapons and tactics allowed the United States to inflict severe losses on Chinese forces, even as it gave up wide swaths of territory.

The U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy expected to conduct sea and air operations in what we now refer to as a permissive environment, without significant interference from Communist forces. The Navy was right; the Air Force was wrong. Expecting overwhelming advantages in training and material, the U.S. air forces found cagey Communist forces equipped with the MiG-15 interceptors, which could outfight American piston-engined aircraft and most early jets. Formations of B-29s attempted to conduct daylight precision bombing raids of North Korea, finding that MiG-15s could cut them to pieces. U.S. forces, fresh from the bloody organizational fights that had birthed the U.S. Air Force, also struggled to develop a compatible, cooperative ground-air doctrine. Still, despite the problems, the United States managed to establish and hold air superiority for most of the war, using that freedom to inflict severe damage on Chinese and North Korean forces, infrastructure and logistics.

Lessons and Legacies:

The most important legacy of the first Sino-American War is the enduring division of the Korean Peninsula. Following the exhaustion of the Chinese counteroffensive, neither side really threatened to throw the other off the peninsula. The relationships between Seoul, Washington, Beijing and Pyongyang have changed mightily over the years, but the conflict remains frozen along the geography established in 1953.

Many of the problems have stayed the same, despite the fundamental transformations that have overtaken global politics. Beijing has grown tired of the antics of its North Korean client, just as

South Korea has grown significantly in wealth and power. But North Korea can still threaten the security and prosperity of the Republic of Korea, and threats to the DPRK are still felt in Beijing.

China and the United States remember this conflict much differently. For the United States, the Korean War represents an odd aberration; a war fought for justice, but without satisfactory resolution. Americans' most enduring memory of the conflict came through the television show *M.A.S.H.*, which used the war as a proxy for talking about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Even this memory has begun to fade, however.

For China, the war represents a remarkable victory over imperialism in the face of overwhelming odds. It introduced the People's Republic of China to the international system with a (literal) bang. At the same time, the legacy of the war complicated China's international situation. In part because of the memory of Chinese intervention, but also in combination with China's domestic politics, the United States managed to keep the PRC isolated from the international system into the 1970s. Today, the PRC poses a quasi-imperial threat to neighbors all along its vast periphery, while at the same time representing one of the three major tent-poles of the growing global economy.

Militarily, the political, social and technological conditions that produced mass infantry warfare in Korea in the 1950s no longer hold. The United States has grown accustomed to fighting opponents who excel in hybrid warfare, but the People's Liberation Army has been out of that business for decades. The ground forces of the PLA are now transitioning between mechanized and postmechanized warfare, while the air and sea forces are in the process of perfecting the world's most extensive anti-access/area denial system [5]. If conflict were to happen again, China would challenge U.S. control of the air and seas in a way that it never did during the Korean conflict.

The most interesting, useful lessons may involve botched war termination. The Korean War dragged on for nearly two years after the settlement of the key strategic issues became clear. Nevertheless, poor communication between Washington and Beijing, combined with reputational concerns on both sides, inflated minor issues—such as POW repatriation—and extended the war well beyond its productive limits. That the United States viewed its conflict with China as a proxy war complicated the problem, as American policy makers became obsessed with the message that every action sent to the Soviet Union. In any future conflict, even as political questions associated with escalation and reputation loom large, Beijing can likely count on having Washington's full, focused attention.

Conclusion

There was nothing good about the last Sino-American War, not even the “peace” that resulted from it. The experience of this war, now nearly forgotten on both sides, should serve as a grim lesson for policy makers in both Washington and Beijing. The Korean War was anything but accidental, but miscalculation and miscommunication both extended and broadened the war beyond its necessary boundaries.