



The forgotten war

Seventy years ago the armistice that ended the fighting in Korea avoiding a nuclear conflict between the superpowers. A look at those distant events, without losing sight of the Ukrainian conflict and its implications.

On the origins of the conflict

On November 27, 1943, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill and Chinese General Chiang Kai-shek met in Cairo to reaffirm their common will to fight Japan to its unconditional surrender and to discuss of the future arrangement of North-East Asia after the end of the conflict. In the declaration that followed the conference, the three leaders declared that, after the war, Manchuria, Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands would return to China, while Korea - subjected by the Japanese since 1910 following the Russo-Japanese conflict - would instead become independent, albeit in "due time".



Fig. 1. Chiang Kai-shek, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill at the 1943 Cairo conference. (From: Wikimedia Commons)

At the end of November 1943, Stalin, who had not attended the conference, communicated to Roosevelt

that he accepted the Allied declaration formulated in Cairo. Although it was not clearly specified in the text of the declaration, Roosevelt's idea was to grant independence to Korea at the end of a period of trusteeship, a topic on which the Allies then agreed verbally during the subsequent Yalta conference in February 1945.

In August of that same year, the Soviet Union's entry into the war against Japan threw into crisis what had been agreed at Yalta six months earlier. Soviet troops, who had entered Korea from Manchuria, met up with American troops, who meanwhile were advancing from the south, at approximately the 38th parallel, a line which became the de facto geographical demarcation between the respective occupation zones of the two Allied Powers.

A situation very similar to that which occurred with the occupation of Germany therefore arose, where the Soviets on one side, and the Anglo-French-Americans on the other, created two distinct areas subject to their respective political-military influences. The two similar zones created in Korea made the hypothesis of a joint trusteeship of the country more complicated - if not impossible - since between United States and Soviet Union that competition for their respective spheres of influence on a global level was beginning to manifest itself, which would soon lead to the so-called "Cold War".

Nonetheless, in December 1945 the representatives of USA and USSR met in Moscow to find an agreement regarding the joint administration of Korea, agreeing to set up a special Commission which, over a five-year period, would have to negotiate with the local civil and

political realities the transition towards the country's independence.

In the three-year period 1945-1947 the advent of the so-called "Truman Doctrine" or of the "global containment" of Soviet influence condemned the work of the Allied Commission to definitive failure, which met one last time in the summer of 1947 without reaching any shared solution for the unification of the country. The rivalries between the two new superpowers were soon joined by those within the Korean social fabric, in particular between the two main nationalist movements, i.e. the one of communist ideology led by Kim Il Sung, and the conservative and pro-Western one led by Syngman Rhee.

Both movements, in fact, pursued the same goal, albeit in an irreconcilable way, namely the unification of Korea under a regime inspired by their respective political orientations.

Given the impossibility of reaching an agreement with the former Soviet allies, in September 1947 United States submitted the Korean question to the United Nations, trusting, for a political solution in their favor, in the broad consensus and influence that they had at the time in the General Assembly, in such a way as to circumvent the veto power employed by the Soviets in the Security Council.

In doing so, on November 14, 1947, USA managed to get the General Assembly to approve a resolution for the creation of a temporary international commission with the task of organizing free elections that would give life to a Korean national government.

Faced with the Communists' refusal to allow the members of the Commission to operate in the north of the country, a new UN resolution limited the latter's mandate to the area south of the 38th parallel, thus condemning the country to permanent division and laying the groundwork for the future conflict between the two Koreas.

The elections in the south of the country were held, under the control of the UN representatives, at the beginning of May 1948. They determined the victory of the conservatives led by Rhee - who was later elected President of the Republic - over the political forces of the left, within which pro-Soviet communists constituted only a minority. The following December, on the basis of the report drawn up by the members of

the Temporary Commission, the General Assembly declared the elections valid and proclaimed the birth of the Republic of Korea with Seoul as its capital.

In the north of the country, Kim Il Sung, who enjoyed Stalin's support, was instead appointed Prime Minister of the newly established People's Republic of Korea in September 1948. The following year, he became leader of the North Korean Workers' Party.

Already at the end of 1948, the subdivision of the country - also at an ideological and international level - led to a progressive increase in tension between the two Koreas, whose respective leaderships aimed to unify the nation with the support of the reference superpower. In this context, in the south the Government unleashed a harsh repression against the communist opponents supported by the North, while Pyongyang, instead, tried to infiltrate the security forces of Seoul and organize armed guerrilla groups within the rival country. All this took place at the same time as the withdrawal of occupying troops by both superpowers, a circumstance that made tension between the two Koreas even more explosive.

In 1949 the communist guerrillas became particularly insidious in the south, reaching about 6,000 fighters, active mainly in the mountainous region of Chiri and on the island of Cheju Do.

To resolve the situation to his advantage, in early 1949, President Rhee officially asked for help from United States to invade the North and unify the country, but Truman, afraid of triggering a conflict with the Soviet Union, denied him the support, which, moreover, did not make the South Korean President give up his intentions.

At the same time in Pyongyang Kim Il Sung had built up a respectable army made up largely of veterans who had fought with the Soviets and the Chinese during the Second World War, first against the Japanese and then against Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist forces, and was seeking Stalin's support to invade the south, but again, the Soviet leader's support was withheld for fear of war with United States.

The first phase of the Korean War

In the winter of 1950, Stalin changed his mind and agreed to support North Korea's offensive against the south. His decision was probably motivated by two factors: the Sino-Soviet alliance treaty signed in

February of that year with Mao Zedong - in the meantime the victor in the civil war with Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists - and the capacity of being able to challenge the United States thanks to the new Soviet atomic capability. These two circumstances led Stalin to believe that US and its allies would not go to war against Soviet Union in the event of an attack by the Communists of the North on the Republic of Korea.

Bolstered by Stalin's endorsement, Kim Il Sung, who had an army of 135,000 men and a substantial armored component of Soviet production, ordered his troops to cross the 38th parallel at first light on June 25, 1950. The North Korean offensive was able to easily overwhelm the enemy defenses allowing the Pyongyang army to rapidly sweep into the south of the peninsula. On the same day, with resolution no. 80 of the Security Council, the UN - which by then was fully invested in the Korean question - requested the immediate cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal beyond the 38th parallel of North Korean troops. The following 27 June, the Security Council passed a further resolution which called on all members of the UN to "offer the necessary assistance to the Republic of Korea to repel the armed attack and restore international peace and security in that area".



Fig 2. Marines ready to disembark (photo by Pixabay, Pexels)

On 7 July the U.N. established a Unified Military Command (UNC) at the head of which was US General Douglas MacArthur, veteran of the war in the Pacific and Supreme Commander of US forces in Japan, who could have under his command a large part of the 8th US army stationed in the Japanese islands, including troops supplied to the UN by a 17-nation coalition.

In the following two months, the UN forces managed to stop the advance of North Korean troops only when they had reached the extreme south of the country, in the so-called "Pusan perimeter", but on 15 September, thanks to the success of the amphibious at the MacArthur-designed port city of Inchon, the strategic situation was reversed. The following September 28, Seoul was retaken by UN troops, while the large North Korean forces, who were still south of the new front line, were forced to fall back beyond the 38th parallel in order not to be cut off from their supply lines. MacArthur's skillful move seemed to have brought the situation back to the status quo ante of June 25, but on the following October 7 a resolution of the UN General Assembly, which called for the establishment of a Commission for the reunification and reconstruction of Korea (UNCURK), was the foothold by which MacArthur ordered the forces under his command to cross the 38th parallel with the aim of conquering North Korea.

Although the American general had reassured Truman that "the 8th Army would be back home for Christmas", things soon took a different turn from his will. Unable to contain the advance of the UN troops, Kim Il Sung in fact asked for help from Stalin who, while not directly involving his own armed forces, put pressure on Mao to rush to the aid of the North Koreans with some divisions of Chinese "volunteers". After initial hesitation, Mao agreed to send nine divisions of "volunteers" to Korea, hoping that, if successful, he could resolve the Korean and Taiwan questions from a position of strength.

The second phase of the fighting and the "freezing" of the conflict

On October 27, 1950, 180,000 Chinese "volunteers" crossed the Yalu River entering Korea and starting a vast offensive which, three months later, ended due to the huge losses and the excessive lengthening of the logistical lines, bringing the new front line 80 km south of the initial border on the 38th parallel.

However, on January 25, 1951, MacArthur regained the initiative by unleashing a counter-offensive that led the UN forces to liberate Seoul again (March 7) and to push once again beyond the 38th parallel.

At the beginning of April Truman, pushed by the allies, who feared a dangerous spiraling of the conflict,

prepared a declaration in which he said he was ready to undertake negotiations for a truce and submitted it to the preventive judgment of MacArthur who, opposed to ending the conflict before having definitively unified the country, declared in response that in order to negotiate the ceasefire, the Chinese would have to submit to the conditions imposed by the UN. MacArthur's initiative, who had previously criticized his Commander in Chief, led, on April 11, to his dismissal from command and the end of his brilliant career.

A few days later, on April 22, the Chinese launched a new offensive which, despite the loss of about 200,000 men, did not lead to significant changes in the stalemate that had arisen in the meantime.

At the end of May 1952, the two opposing parties, by now exhausted by the huge human and material losses of the conflict, began preliminary contacts in order to negotiate an armistice which provided for the return to the separation line of the 38th parallel. But despite hopes of a quick conclusion to the conflict, the negotiations dragged on wearily for over two years, during which fighting along the front lines and, above all, US aerial bombardment deep into North Korean territory never quite ceased.

It was precisely following the massive bombings carried out by the United States Air Force against the

North Korean dams that, in the summer of 1953, the peace negotiations regained strength leading, on July 27 of that year, to the signing of an armistice which substantially envisaged the status quo ante of June 1950 as well as the creation of the demilitarized zone straddling the 38th parallel.

The 1953 armistice, therefore, sanctioned the definitive division of Korea into two distinct states without them subsequently reaching a real peace treaty, which, in theory, still sees them opposed in a conflict that has been lasting for 70 years and now almost forgotten.

Knowledge of the facts long gone in time helps us to understand today what could be one of the possible scenarios of the Ukrainian war. If it were not possible to reconquer the lost territories, the Ukrainian government could evaluate a sort of Korean-style peace, that would allow the end of the fighting and above all the end of possible dangerous nuclear escalations. What might appear negative or defamatory today might not be so in a few years, when the situation will have evolved in ways that are currently unpredictable.

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