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## KOREA AND VIET NAM

### Some Speculations about the Possible Influences of the Korean War on American Policy in Viet Nam

BY STUART DRUMMOND<sup>1</sup>

THE two wars which the United States has fought in the Far East in order to contain Communist expansion provide some interesting comparisons. There are some obvious similarities which it is only necessary to outline. Both Korea and Viet Nam are situated on the borders of China in positions of strategic importance. They had both been subject to colonial rule, and both became divided when this was ended, with Communist régimes being established in the northern parts. In the southern parts it did not prove easy to establish effective political systems, and autocratic governments resulted. Popular support for Rhee and for Diem was strictly limited, and the international standing of the two was not of a high order. These factors encouraged Kim Il Sung and Ho Chi Minh to attempt the unification of their countries, and neither was at all loath to use force in pursuing this object. They both had suitable instruments, for both the Russian trained and equipped K.P.A. (Korean People's Army) and the forces of General Giap were military machines of considerable power and efficiency in comparison with the somewhat feeble armies they would need to overcome. In both countries, the U.S. military advisers to the southern armies seriously exaggerated the abilities of the armies they were helping to create. What General Roberts of the Korean Military Advisory Group called "the best doggoned shooting army outside the United States" fell to pieces within a few days of the North Korean invasion, while in the very different circumstances of Viet Nam the A.R.V.N. (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam) was on the point of collapse in 1965. In each case the United States felt it had to intervene to demonstrate that success was not that easy, to prevent others attempting similar adventures in other states; to contain Communist expansion.

There are, of course, some marked differences between the two wars. The Korean War was fought under the banner of the United Nations, and with the support of the vast majority of its members. In particular Western European countries provided considerable military assistance. The United States is in a much lonelier position in Viet Nam, with little encouragement from Europe, and with armed forces being contributed only by its closest allies in S.E. Asia and Australasia. It suffers not only from international criticism, but also from dissension at home.

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This was not lacking during the Korean War, but was then concerned with the question of how to prosecute the war more effectively, or with the aim and scope of the war; the fundamental question of whether the United States should or should not be at war was scarcely raised at all. Strategically, also, the United States had some advantages in Korea. It had in Japan a secure base from which to operate, and it was fighting in a peninsula where its flanks were secure, whereas it is clear that neither of these obtain in Viet Nam. This underlines the major difference between the two wars, that whereas the Koreans fought conventionally, the North Vietnamese and their southern compatriots in the Viet Cong use the techniques of revolutionary war in a highly sophisticated fashion, perfected through twenty years of struggle. It is probably because of this that one can make a further distinction. North Korea was very much more dependent on its allies. There can be little doubt that without the massive deliveries of equipment from the U.S.S.R. in the winter of 1949-50 and without Soviet approval, the crossing of the 38th Parallel could scarcely have been contemplated. Indeed, it is possible that the Soviet Union made the initial suggestion of invasion. Whatever the feelings of the Chinese government about the wisdom of starting revolutionary war in South Viet Nam, there seems no reason to believe that Ho was either pushed into action, or indeed, could have been easily restrained by China. Not only is he far more independent than was Kim Il Sung, but he has shown himself well able to continue the war alone. After the collapse of the K.P.A. in September, 1950, the war was virtually taken over by China, and, although North Viet Nam obviously relies upon its allies to provide such equipment as S.A.M. missiles and aircraft, there is no sign of need of further help. Thus the United States in Viet Nam is fighting a war with an enemy more subtle and skilful and one far more independent, under conditions which are psychologically and strategically far more difficult.

The United States has made some curious miscalculations about the nature of the military threat in the two areas. In 1950 intelligence assessments pointed towards guerrilla war as the greatest risk to be faced in Korea. This ignored the conventional equipment, particularly the armour, that was being provided to the K.P.A., the fact that the K.P.A. relied upon Russian advice, and that Russian military thinking was dominated by their experience of tank battles in Europe. One can excuse this American miscalculation, but it is more difficult to understand why those who later advised Ngo Dinh Diem should have looked to the Korean War for a model of the military threat likely in South Viet Nam, rather than to the actual practice of General Giap during the struggle against France. As Bernard Fall emphasizes,<sup>2</sup> the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory

<sup>2</sup> Bernard B. Fall: "The Two Vietnams" (Pall Mall Press, Revised Edition, 1965), pp. 325-6.

Group "saw their essential mission as training a South Vietnamese Army (A.R.V.N.) to resist a Korea-like onslaught of Viet Minh regular forces streaming across the 17th Parallel in division formation." This can be explained in terms of a natural tendency for military thinkers to be dominated by what was learned in the last war they fought, and almost certainly to discount the experience of their defeated predecessors. Yet it still seems unusual not to study the military doctrines and practice of the potential enemy, and not to plan for the war which he says he will fight, and indeed which he has recently fought with great success. While the failure of the South Vietnamese to control the Viet Cong insurgency is probably due to such factors as inadequate social policies, and above all the lack of a basic framework of able local administration and effective police forces, the fact that there were few military units trained in counter-insurgency and capable of shielding those officials who did try to maintain the government's writ made the situation even more desperate.

The drawing of a false analogy with Korea helped the Viet Cong to establish itself firmly in the early 1960s, and this makes one ask whether U.S. policies and actions in Viet Nam have been influenced in any other way by memories of the earlier war. In November, 1950, the character of the Korean War was changed by the appearance of Chinese volunteers, and very soon two issues were to arise. The immediate problem was how to deal with China, who had become the "real enemy." The clash between President Truman and General MacArthur over this issue is well known. MacArthur's view that China could not be fought effectively by confining the struggle to Korean soil was rejected, and China's air and other bases in Manchuria, indeed, the whole of its territory, remained inviolate. There was no pressure on the Chinese beyond the weight of casualties incurred in Korea, and the strain on their resources resulting from their effort there. Although Ridgeway with his "meat-grinder" tactics found a way to deal with the pressure of the Chinese mass armies, these tactics could hardly result in anything but containment, and it was evident that the idea of fighting for a victory had to be abandoned. Thus the second issue, one concerning the aim of the war, was resolved, but there remained a problem of negotiation. How was the enemy to be forced to accept a peace incorporating the stalemate situation? In fact, given Korea's peninsular character, which ensured the security of his flanks, once Ridgeway had succeeded in stabilizing the front, the Chinese recognized that a break-through was unlikely. As a result the saga of Panmunjom began, which in its turn raised the final issue of how peace talks could be brought to an end. During the two years of armistice talks, the Chinese made their position impregnable, and made the political and psychological position of the United States weaker, so that ultimately it accepted something it considered unsatisfactory. It is argued by some that even the

armistice agreement of 1953 could not have been obtained but for threats of action directed against China made by Eisenhower.<sup>3</sup> It would seem, if we accept this, that the question of how to deal with the "real enemy" had been re-opened and answered in a different manner from the way it was by Truman and Ridgeway. When one turns to look at the war in Viet Nam, it is evident that all of these problems have arisen, though naturally in different guises. The analysis that follows will speculate on how far experience in Korea has led to similar reactions in Viet Nam, and how far it has led to other answers being sought; whether it has led to the U.S.A. being obsessed by what happened or whether indeed on occasions there has been a failure to appreciate a lesson that should have been learned.

In February, 1965, when the U.S.A. intervened in Viet Nam, the immediate problem was to prevent the collapse of the A.R.V.N. and of the government of South Viet Nam. This was to be achieved by the introduction of ground troops on a sufficiently large scale to prevent the Viet Cong from making the transition to the final stage, the war of annihilation. They could be reasonably confident of being able to do this, but they would still be faced with two problems. In the first instance, the Viet Cong would continue operating at the previous stage of insurgency, and in the second they would continue to be supplied and reinforced from the north. There was the wide-open flank on the borders with Laos and Cambodia, which could not be made secure. Given these factors, the U.S.A. could have no reason for believing that it would be any more successful in defeating the Viet Cong than before. The situation looked at least as difficult, if entirely different in character, as that faced once the Chinese had dug in during 1951. The conclusion was that apparently reached by Eisenhower in 1953. Since the U.S.A. firmly believed that the Viet Cong was directed from Hanoi and that it was here that the real enemy was, then it was obvious that it was Hanoi which had to be persuaded to end the struggle. It should perhaps be noted that once the U.S.A. was involved no one appears to have had any intention of fighting for military victory—but rather of forcing negotiations. The problem thus became one of pressing Hanoi, the real enemy, to agree to negotiations. It seems that the first move came with the Tonkin Gulf affair, a warning that could be termed a modern version of Eisenhower's threat to "strike at China . . . on two or three other fronts of its (the U.S.A.'s) choosing." If this is so, it had no effect, and, in February, 1965, it was decided to mount an air assault simultaneously with the introduction of land forces. This air assault was programmed so as to mount slowly in intensity, and thus show clearly to North Viet Nam the ultimate cost of continuing the war.

<sup>3</sup> For this argument see, e.g., D. Rees: "Korea, The Limited War" (Macmillan, 1964), pp. 404-5, 414-20.

The bombing has not achieved its objective, and indeed it is now almost entirely discussed in terms of interdiction. One could argue that the way in which it was mounted, with its slowly increasing weight of attacks, was psychologically mistaken. At the same time, if one goes back to the analogy with China in 1953, it could be plausibly argued that the crucial factors then were a change of attitude in China and one of leadership in Russia, and that the Eisenhower threats were not as significant as the administration believed. This would imply that the U.S. in 1953 was able to affect the course of events only to a marginal extent, and that these were really determined by what happened in the Communist countries. From this one might conclude, that in Viet Nam also, it has only a limited power to initiate events, and has to wait for a change of policy or political leadership in Hanoi, or for effective pressure to be put on Hanoi by Russia or China for reasons of their own.

Experience in Korea should have led the U.S.A. to be sceptical about a policy of massive air attacks on lines of communications. Such attacks may well have crippled the K.P.A. drive towards Pusan in 1950, but they had little effect throughout 1951-53 when the aim was to cut off the Chinese and North Korean armies from their sources of supply across the Yalu River. Although the amount that could be moved by rail was sharply reduced, it soon became obvious that by use of all roads and of vast numbers of labourers to carry out instant repairs or to act as coolies, adequate supplies could be brought to the front. Even allowing for the greater accuracy of today's strike aircraft, and the fact that there is no self-denying ordinance beyond the 17th Parallel, i.e. across the equivalent of the Yalu, the chances of achieving more in Viet Nam than in Korea do not seem considerable. The requirements of a guerrilla army, or even of the regular units of the North Vietnamese Army, are less than were those of the considerable forces dug in across the Korean peninsula. The North Vietnamese have had much experience of moving men and supplies by night and along a variety of roads and tracks through the hills and jungles. It would be surprising if their skill had declined since the 1950s. Within their own country, as was the case in Korea, they are able to use manpower on a large scale to repair or by-pass damaged sections of road and rail. That conventional air war cannot be decisive seems proven; that it limits to any important extent the scale of the war in the south is an issue on which there are differing opinions, but about which some competent observers are highly sceptical. Such doubts, one feels, should have arisen from contemplation of the Korean War.

No one would pretend that the bombing offensive has had no effect. There is no doubt that, during the truces, the North Vietnamese have taken advantage of the relief afforded to send through the maximum amount of material. Equally, the insistence of the various North Vietnamese spokesmen upon a cessation of bombing as a preliminary to talks

shows that they are most anxious to bring these attacks to an end. Yet it is also obvious that they are not so anxious that they are willing to make major concessions in return, for instance, by agreeing to withdraw their regular forces or to stop supplies to the south. This seemed almost to be admitted by the State Department when, on 29th January, 1968, it re-interpreted President Johnson's San Antonio statement, announcing that it would agree to talks as long as the North Vietnamese did not take advantage of this to increase the level of their traffic beyond what had become normal. It was soon clearly demonstrated by the threat to Khe Sanh and the Tet offensive that this normal level was a very high one. Indeed, one of the greatest weaknesses of the Americans' position is this complete failure to achieve, or even to look like achieving, a stabilization of the front as had occurred in Korea in 1951. They are thus in a far worse position than they were then, for during the long tedious years of trench warfare that the soldiers had to endure while the Panmunjom negotiations ground on, they could at least be certain that they were not losing ground and that their base was becoming more secure, not less.

There are, then, considerable reasons for the U.S. to be hesitant about which course to follow. Bombing is not making Hanoi much more amenable to America's suggestions, nor does it prevent a very high level of infiltration. Yet it does seem that there are cogent reasons for not agreeing to a complete cessation, since infiltration might increase, but above all, because there would be no obvious way to force North Viet Nam to negotiate urgently and meaningfully. It would be surprising if the two years of truce talks at Panmunjom had not left deep marks on the Americans, and fundamentally conditioned their whole approach towards negotiating with the Communists. Talks began then, after the failure of the Chinese offensives in the spring of 1951, and resulted in a relaxation of American military efforts. The "meat-grinder" tactics of Ridgeway were not continued, the Chinese defensive lines were strengthened to an extraordinary extent, and a military stalemate resulted. There was no means by which the U.S.A. could force the Communists to conclude negotiations, and attempts to find such a means by resort to interdiction bombing failed, as we have seen.

One must, for this reason alone, expect the U.S.A. to regard any suggestion to begin negotiations with the deepest mistrust, if it poses as a precondition some relaxation of pressure. It must feel that it is the total effect of its actions that brings the possibility of talks, and that to lessen these efforts may do nothing more than to produce a second Panmunjom. What is more, the discussions would be parallel by continuing revolutionary war inside South Viet Nam. It had, therefore, seemed likely before the San Antonio declaration that the United States would insist upon a renunciation by North Viet Nam of all direct assistance to the Viet Cong. Without this, the U.S.A. would be in a much more difficult

position than in 1951-53. Once the air offensive were halted, it would be almost impossible to recommence it. Even if the North Vietnamese agreed to disengage from the battle, such disengagement would seem more easily reversed than would be an American cessation of bombing. To begin talks on the basis of the San Antonio formula, as modified on the 29th January, would have meant that the U.S.A. would be taking all the risks, while the North would be left with virtually all its options open and able to continue discussions indefinitely in an effort to gain a settlement that would be highly favourable to it. This argument seems to have weighed heavily with President Johnson, for although since then he has limited the scope of the air attacks to targets south of the 20th Parallel, and thus abandoned the attempt to force negotiations through sheer weight of metal, he has been so far unwilling to limit interdiction.

In this analysis, the parallel has been drawn between China in 1950-53 and North Viet Nam today, with the Viet Cong cast in the role of North Korea. This seems to be the most relevant way in which to examine how Korea has affected American policy. One should, perhaps, also examine relations between the U.S.A. and China today, to see how these have been shaped by the past. In so far as the U.S.A. has chosen not to invade the North, it may be argued that the lesson of September, 1950, has been applied. Equally it may be said that China has not sent volunteers on the Korean scale in the belief that the U.S.A. would choose to act as Eisenhower threatened in 1953, rather than as Truman acted in 1950-52. However, it is probably more accurate to argue that, at least so far, neither side can see any reason for taking such an action, the consequences of which are not easily calculable.

Summarizing these speculations, one may tentatively conclude that the influences of the Korean War on American policy have not been entirely fortunate. In the first instance they led to preparations to fight the wrong kind of war. They probably helped in the adoption of the policy of air bombardment as a means of putting pressure on Hanoi, and almost certainly to create the frame of mind that considered this essential. Yet, in contrast, they do not seem to have led to sufficient hesitations and doubts about the efficacy of bombing, either as a political weapon, or as a means of interdiction. Finally, the traumatic experience of Panmunjom must surely be making the approach to peace negotiations more uncertain and more agonizing than it would be in any case. It would be the final irony, if after years spent examining each suggestion from Hanoi with the utmost suspicion, the new position of Johnson were to persuade the U.S.A. to engage in a marathon conference, compared with which Panmunjom would seem a model of briskness and expedition.

## THE CAMPAIGNS OF BELISARIUS IN ITALY

BY MAJOR-GENERAL G. SURTEES, C.B., C.B.E., M.C.

THESE campaigns took place over the years A.D. 535 to A.D. 540 and again from 544 to 549. In the first period, Belisarius, the Byzantine general, reconquered Italy from the Goths. But before long nearly all he had won was lost. He was sent back to recover the country; the forces allotted him were hopelessly inadequate; five years of indecisive fighting resulted.

### THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

When Justinian became Emperor in 527, the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire, capital Constantinople, comprised the territory covered by modern Turkey, northern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, northern Egypt and the African coast as far west as Benghazi, southern Yugoslavia, Albania, Bulgaria and Greece.

In the army, which was recruited from many races, the infantry had lost its earlier pride of place, for the legion, with its patriotism and discipline, had long since disappeared. Reliance was placed on cavalry, mostly mercenaries raised by soldiers of fortune from anywhere, and they were good, though subject to the usual faults of their kind. Also mainly mounted were the private armies of Byzantine high-ups, liable to serve the Empire in war.

And that was often enough, for Justinian had constant trouble with neighbouring states. On the east was the Persian Empire, always ready to start up a war on the slightest excuse. To the north were the Huns and Bulgarians, who did not bother about a pretext when they felt like raiding or invading.

There was also trouble in plenty within the Empire. Yet the Emperor, a remarkable mixture of strong and weak qualities, had imperialistic ambitions. He aspired to regain two regions of the former Western Roman Empire—erstwhile Carthagina held by the Vandals; Italy, Sicily and what is now northern Yugoslavia occupied by the Ostrogoths. But first he had a war with Persia on his hands, and this brings me to Belisarius, then aged 25, whom he appointed C-in-C on that front.

### BELISARIUS

Born about 505 in Macedonia, he had first joined the royal body-guard and rapidly risen to prominence. Tall, well-built, handsome and a dedicated soldier, he became noted for boldness, resource and his inventive mind. Being very rich he then formed his own Household Regiment of cavalry.