

WHAT SET OFF THE KOREAN CONFLICT OF 1950?

Interests, Reputation, and Emotions

Emmanuel PETIT*

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In April 2018, a historic meeting took place between the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un, and the president of South Korean Moon Jae-In, starting with a highly symbolic handshake in the demilitarized zone separating their two countries. This came as a cooperative move that helped greatly to pave the way to the ground-breaking US-North Korea summit in June 2018 (as studied by Mark Young in his chapter “The Run up to the Trump/Kim Singapore Summit” in this volume) and later in February 2019. As the whole world still watches two countries that are theoretically still at war and wonders if the two Koreas will be able to sign a peace treaty (only an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, at the end of the conflict that began in 1950), I will review, following Jonathan Mercer’s analysis (2013), the unexplored affective reasons why military conflict took place between these countries.

* GREThA, University of Bordeaux. Emmanuel.petit@u-bordeaux.fr.

1. UNEXPECTED HOSTILITIES

To everyone but those who knew it was going to take place, the attack launched by North Korea against South Korea at 4 am on June 25, 1950 was a genuine surprise.

For the three years preceding the war, and contrary to the policy actively conducted at the same time in Western Europe, American leaders had not thought it necessary, or wise, to supply the South Korean government with the means to defend itself. The CIA had of course thought an invasion by North Korea was “probable” (Mercer, 2013, p. 231¹) – once the US troops withdrew from the peninsula in 1949 – but it was far from suspecting that an attack was imminent. The possibility there would be an attack was known and often discussed, but its launch so soon after the troop withdrawal caught the US president and his staff by surprise.

According to the historian Allan Millet, President Harry Truman felt offended, even insulted, by the attack. On the day of the attack, he told his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, “Dean, we’ve got to stop the sons of bitches no matter what” (Mercer, 2013, p. 232). The next day he wrote to his wife: “Haven’t been so badly upset since Greece and Turkey fell into our lap” (Mercer, 2013, p. 232). The surprise intensified the emotional reactions of the American leaders and contributed to their viewing the North Korean invasion as completely immoral. But the surprise elicited by North Korea’s offensive was followed by even greater astonishment when, contrary to all expectations, the US leaders decided to actively engage in combat on the side of South Korea. It was now the turn of the belligerents and their supporters – the Soviet and Chinese governments – to be deeply surprised. Joseph Stalin, in particular, had not thought the United States would respond militarily to defend a small territory where US interests were not obviously at stake.

The decision to start the Korean War was made by North Korea’s leader, Kim-il Sung, but he could not have done so without the support of the Soviet Union and communist China. Stalin’s position was in fact key. At first he opposed Kim-il Sung’s plan to invade, especially because he thought the United States would feel obliged to intervene militarily as long as US troops were still present in Korea. But by starting to withdraw its troops in June 1949, the United States seemed to be opening the door to North Korean intervention.

¹ Citing U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. 1949. Consequences of U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Korea in Spring, 1949, February 28, 1949.

In the United States as well, a large number of commentators and government or military personnel were caught short by the government's sudden response, which seemed to be a complete reversal of its prior strategy: from withdrawing troops to supporting South Korea through totally unexpected military intervention. The Truman administration's decision to send combat troops to South Korea stunned General MacArthur, who told a colleague, "I don't believe it ... I don't understand!" (Mercer, 2013, p. 231). Historians also report that on the day of the invasion, General Omar Bradley, an Army Chief of Staff and first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "evidently had little or no thought that the United States might reverse its earlier decision and fight to save South Korea" (Mercer, 2013, p. 232). Most American politicians were extremely surprised by the armed intervention. Hadn't Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in his speech at the National Press Club on January 12, 1950, clearly limited the defensive perimeter of the United States to a line running from the Aleutian Islands to Japan and from Japan to the Philippines, thus excluding Korea and Taiwan? Shortly before North Korea attacked, the CIA knew that North Korea had greater military capability than South Korea did, and that it could take Seoul. Even so, a US response was deemed highly improbable.

The parties thus found themselves in a situation where neither had anticipated the other's move: the North Korean attack or the US response. Surprise was a crucial factor in starting the conflict, which was long, costly, and still has serious consequences. To avoid it, could both the Soviet and American decisions have been foreseen? Could anyone have more accurately predicted, and perhaps prevented, the escalation? And, if the parties did not have rational expectations of each other, could a correctly worded threat have been an effective deterrent?

2. THE FAILURE OF RATIONALITY, OR THE EFFECTS OF SURPRISE AND FEAR

2.1. THE LIMITS OF RATIONAL ANALYSIS BASED ON INTERESTS AND REPUTATION

One way to interpret the situation is to use the theory of rational choice (von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1947), which posits that decision makers seek to maximize their interests by taking into account the costs associated with their decisions. They take into account all the

information available to them, and are able to reexamine their beliefs on a probabilistic basis by assimilating any new information they obtain. According to the “common knowledge” hypothesis of rationality, they also believe that the other parties involved are rational and know that they are. If one focuses on questions of strategic conflict from the perspective of the American game theorist Thomas Schelling (1960), the parties’ signals and reputations are two key decision-making factors. Decision makers can signal their intentions to prevent the action of one of their partners or adversaries. However, signals can only be effective, i.e. credible, to the extent the action they underlie involves a cost for the party for whom the signal is intended. For example, a verbal threat of reprisal (in the case of a military invasion) may be made credible if armed forces are amassed at the border, or if mutual defense agreements between partner countries are affirmed and renewed. However, a threat’s credibility crucially depends on the belligerents’ reputation, past behavior, and especially their ability to meet their commitments. In this sense, reputation represents a substantial (and costly) investment for a decision maker, and it must be preserved in the long term.

In the case of the Korean War, the stakeholders’ interests in this “blitzkrieg” were clear and simple: to unite a territory that had suffered under the yoke of the Japanese for 35 years and been split in two after World War II, and to take the enemy’s lands. Since North Korea was militarily superior to South Korea, the temptation to go to war was naturally stronger there. Its significant military superiority led the North Koreans to believe that even if the United States intervened, the conflict would be so short (a few weeks) that the US would not have time to oppose the invasion. For North Korea’s supporters, China and the Soviet Union, the stakes of an invasion were more limited given the low costs they each anticipated (delivery of materiel, and logistics), but significant enough to persuade them to agree to this request from a friendly communist country. In addition, as the US Joint Chiefs of Staff had underscored in 1947, and as many were thinking when the war started, the South Korean peninsula was of practically no interest to the United States from the standpoint of defending its interests. Geostrategically speaking, the United States was mainly concerned at the time with Western Europe, and its defense of its interests in Asia focused on Japan, rather than Korea.

The rational actors in a conflict are, in theory, able to discern the other parties’ interests. That is why the Soviets doubted that the Americans would fight for South Korea: they knew that the United States had only minor interests there and that the cost of a military response

would be high. Mao Zedong also supported initiating hostilities because he thought the United States would not get involved in the defense of such a small country. Stalin took the withdrawal of American troops in June 1949 as a signal that the United States would not get involved and that, on the contrary, South Korea might attack. Mao and Stalin therefore rationally believed that the American “resolutions” (the withdrawal followed by Dean Acheson’s speech in January 1950) were the logical result of the defense of US interests and of American capability. For example, the US will intervene in various regions of the world only when its interests are truly endangered and when the costs of an intervention will be offset by the expected benefits.

On the basis of these factors, the North Korean invasion was logical, rational, and could have been foreseen. What was less so was what seemed to be a sudden “about-face” by the US government. Reputational considerations must therefore be taken into account. It was in fact possible that the United States feared that unless it gave a firm military response to an invasion by an ally of communist regimes, its international reputation would be damaged and weakened. The American government saw the attack by North Korea as a challenge from the Soviet Union, which required a preventive response to avoid the erosion of the United States’ prestige and credibility in the world. Dean Acheson feared that failure to engage would encourage the enemies of the United States and leave its allies perplexed. President Truman, who was afraid of a “domino” effect, warned Congress in this sense, saying “If we were to let Asia go, the Near East would collapse and no telling what would happen to Europe” (Else Papers, 1950). In particular, he thought Stalin had defied the US government in the past and would continue to do so in the future (in Yugoslavia, Turkey, or Iran). Truman believed Stalin had interpreted the American decisions of the eight months preceding the attack as signs of weakness and had given the go-ahead to the North Korean invasion on that basis. And he was determined not to repeat the mistakes of Neville Chamberlain, the British leader who had been unable to halt Hitler’s progress with the 1938 Munich Agreement.

There could therefore be some rationality to the American response. But the reputational argument does not explain why the fear of being seen as indecisive, or weakened, caused the United States to change position so radically. Did the Korean “affair” really endanger the unequalled prestige the United States enjoyed after World War II? And why did North Korea’s (rational) supporters not foresee this change?

To understand the strategic decisions of the main actors in the Korean conflict (Kim-il Sung, Stalin, Mao, and Truman), one must also remember that emotions have a significant effect on a person's beliefs and how people interpret the signals they are sent. Credibility and the search for prestige are among the beliefs that can be called "emotional" (Mercer, 2010). If, in particular, the Americans reacted very quickly to North Korea's intervention, even though the costs inherent in taking such a position were very high, it is probably because they *believed* there was something crucial at stake that would lead to undermining their international reputation. However, nothing indicates that such a belief was shared at the time by the belligerents, or even by the United States' allies. Was it the fear (unjustified) of losing its reputation that pushed the US to intervene in Korea? Does an actor's credibility therefore depend on what it thinks?

2.2. BEYOND RATIONAL ANALYSIS: THE WEIGHT OF EMOTIONS

Stalin would probably have been very surprised to learn that the American leaders believed he thought they might be weak or indecisive. Had he suspected this belief, or been better informed, he probably would have more accurately anticipated the risks North Korea was running by going ahead with the invasion, and opposed it. In fact, Stalin incorrectly assessed the developments in American policy and the new foreign policy direction taken in spring 1950. The main reason for this is that Stalin was unaware of the emotional climate that went along with the turnaround in the American position.

In early 1950, communism's progress across the globe – the crisis in Berlin in 1948–1949; the fall of nationalist China in spring 1949 and the proclamation of the Republic of China the following fall; the Soviet Union's successful test of an atomic bomb on August 29, 1949 – had planted the seeds for a climate of fear, worry, and even paranoia to develop, and led the US government to rethink its foreign policy (Cadeau, 2013). In January 1950, President Truman demanded that a working group be set up to review the country's peace and war objectives. The working group advised a harsher US policy against communism coupled with significantly increased military potential, as the containment policy instituted after World War II was turning out to be weak, ineffective, and overly narrow. Not everyone agreed with the working group's report,

however; Truman himself was very reticent and asked for an assessment of the costs of such a policy change. In this climate, the North Korean offensive caused surprise and tipped the scales in favor of following the working group's recommendations.

Because a military decision had to be made quickly and the Americans had not foreseen that the North Korean attack was imminent, the choice to support South Korea was made precipitously, without cool reflection. Relying on the work of historians, Mercer (2013) in particular reports that the State Department and the CIA never conducted any investigations to determine whether not intervening in a conflict in Korea would harm the international reputation or prestige of the United States. Even Dean Acheson's position seems largely introspective: "During the afternoon [of the 25th] I had everyone and all messages kept out of my room for an hour or two while I ruminated about the situation" (Mercer, 2013, p. 238). The next day, he isolated himself for several hours to write the speech in response to the attack that Truman would give the following day to Congress and the public.

In that speech, two explanations were given to defend a firm attitude and take military action in support of South Korea. Firstly, the North Korean command was weak and indecisive, and defeat was foreseeable. Secondly, the reputation of the United States was at stake: the governments of several European countries were wondering, "in a state of near-panic", what the American position would be. For Acheson, whether the outcome of the military intervention was favorable or not, "it was important for us to do something (Mercer, 2013, p. 234).

While American leaders feared their credibility was in danger, it is highly probable that neither Stalin nor Mao thought so. But what about the governments of the United States' allies? Contrary to what the American leaders believed or expected, reactions abroad were far from unanimous. For example, the British Cabinet did not meet until June 27, 1950, and the situation in Korea was relegated to fourth position on the meeting's agenda. While the invasion was of course denounced, prudence was suggested and priority given to the continued presence of the United States in Europe. Its reputation did not seem to be in doubt at any time. In France, the start of the conflict elicited greater concern and misgivings; there was fear of American involvement, the extension of the conflict, and even use of the atomic bomb. The newspaper *Le Monde* underscored the inconsistency and uncertainty of US policy, recalling that the troop withdrawal in 1949 had been driven by the fact that Korea was of little strategic interest. In Canada, the

US response elicited surprise. Like the British, the Canadians wanted the US intervention to be conducted under the supervision of the United Nations.

The paradox of this escalation is that it was based on mistaken beliefs about reputation. The United States was not likely, in the eyes of its allies and probably even more so of its enemies, to lose credibility, prestige, or even its ability to contain communism, by failing to engage in South Korea. Or at least, such a scenario was doubtful. And yet the Truman administration entered the conflict primarily to defend the country's reputation: "[I]f we just stand by," said Truman, "they'll move into Iran and they'll take over the Middle East. There's no telling what they'll do, if we don't put up a fight now" (Mercer, 2013, p. 234). The Americans were above all afraid of being seen as weak, uncertain, indecisive, or weak-willed. These feelings, the prevailing climate of fear, and the astonishment caused by the attack dictated how U.S. leaders interpreted the events of June 25, 1950. Surprise shaped their judgment and led them to believe their credibility was in real danger. American decision makers used their feelings and intuition as unseen proof that others, both allies and adversaries, suspected that they had little determination or desire to be involved in international affairs. To correctly anticipate events, Stalin would have had to accomplish two difficult tasks (Mercer, 2013). On the one hand, he would have had to foresee that the United States would take a (new) strategic direction that it had not yet adopted and that would be surprising. On the other, he would have had to be able to imagine what the Americans were thinking about him with regard to the alleged weakness of their foreign policy. To foresee and prevent the American response, he would therefore have had to imagine what emotions the Americans would feel (worry) and above all, foresee what they would feel after the North Korean attack (panic). The emotional climate at the time explains the turnabout in the American strategy, their mistaken belief that their reputation was in danger, and their costly and "disinterested" armed involvement in the Korean civil war.

3. CONCLUSION: EMOTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The analysis presented in this chapter highlights the advantage of using emotional tools (fear and surprise) in the field of international relations.

Other historical cases have illustrated this, such as the role of fear after the September 11, 2001 attacks (Hall and Ross, 2015), anger in managing the Taiwanese crisis (Hall, 2011) or very differently, affective relations in resolving conflicts between Allies during the Suez crisis in 1956 (Eznack, 2011). The history of the Korean War and its sudden start show a specific moment when negotiations that could have been undertaken were not. Before negotiations or a conflict, rational actors generally form expectations on the basis of their interests and those of their adversaries, evaluate the various parties' reputations, and send various signals or threats to clarify their intentions. In the case of the Korean War, this type of rationality failed completely, such that not even a first phase of negotiations could be initiated. Against a background of concern that turned into panic, surprise caused the armed conflict to escalate.

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