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CLAUSEWITZ AND THE DECISION TO INVADE NORTH KOREA

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On 25 June 1950 North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel in an attempt to unify the peninsula under the communist regime of Kim Il Sung. Since 1949, the 38th parallel was more than a political boundary, it was also a line delineating US and Soviet spheres of influence. Thus, the North Korean attack represented a clash between the Soviet and American power systems. From the beginning, it was viewed as a Soviet move with global implications. Failure to respond would be regarded as a sign of weakness, undermining US credibility and endangering the whole edifice of containment; the basis of US foreign policy. The legal basis for intervention was provided by United Nations Security Council Resolutions sponsored by Washington. Although Korea was formally a UN war, the running of it was left to Truman, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and MacArthur. Truman stated, "We must be damned careful...We want to take any steps we have to to push the North Koreans behind the line, but I don't want to get us overcommitted to a whole lot of other things that could mean war."¹ From the start, US involvement was uniquely limited. Following the brilliant success of MacArthur's Inchon landing, the aggressor had been contained and Truman's objectives of restoring peace and the border were nearly satisfied. Yet this victory offered options which raised difficult questions: stand at the 38th parallel or invade the North to reunify the peninsula by force of arms. Fatefully, the US decided to support a move northward; a step that led to an escalation of the war. From a US perspective, what were the implications of this decision? Would Korea remain a limited war? Did it create a challenge to the time-honored tradition of civilian control over the military, as represented by Truman and MacArthur? This paper is a critical analysis of these questions in light of the concepts of limited war and civil-military relations espoused by Clausewitz.

LIMITED WAR

Clausewitz states that the conditions for defeating an enemy (total war) presuppose "...an inclination for serious risks..."² When this is not present, the object of military activity is limited because "the intentions are too limited to justify anything more" (limited war).³

An 11th of September 1950 National Security Council (NSC) paper, approved by Truman, stated that after Inchon, if there was no indication or threat of entry of Soviet or Chinese Communist elements in force, MacArthur would extend his operations north of the parallel and make plans for the occupation of North Korea.⁴ Even so, Truman had consistently indicated he was unwilling to take serious risks which could possibly lead to another World War, and his most important political objective was not the unification of Korea. In fact, as Neustadt notes⁵, it was among the least of the objectives on his mind. He wanted to avoid the "wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time," as General Bradley, Chairman, JCS, put it - and any war. His highest priorities were to strengthen NATO fast, rearm the United States without inflation, get on with the Fair Deal, keep the Democrats in office and calm the waters stirred by men like Senator McCarthy.⁶ Indeed, Korean unity was so low in Truman's order of priorities that it was off his list within three months of its adoption. By December 1950, as the enemy poured south, his objective became merely to hang on. Thus, from the President's perspective the conflict in Korea continued to be limited in scope because, as Clausewitz stated, his "...intentions were too limited to justify anything more."

The limitations imposed by the September 11 NSC paper regarding Soviet or Chinese involvement reinforce this view. Further, the

Administration through its military advisers, the JCS, limited not only military action to the area of Korea, but also limited its objectives, though they changed several times. Resources that could be spared for Korea were also limited, as well as the weapons systems and target systems which were used inside the peninsula. Not only were nuclear weapons not used, but the important North Korean port of Rashin, for example, near the sensitive Soviet border, was partly restricted to UN air attack. Restrictions were added which specifically related to the drive north including prohibition on long range aerial reconnaissance over China and of "hot pursuit" of Chinese and Soviet aircraft over Chinese territory, as well as those imposed on bombardment of bridges over the Yalu River.⁷

It is significant that none of these limitations were or could have been forced upon the United States by the enemy. They were voluntarily assumed. The reasons given for accepting them were various, but practically all of them were reducible to fears of one sort or another: fear of antagonizing the Asian neutrals if Chiang's forces were utilized; fear that the United States would alienate its European allies by prosecuting too vigorously a war in Asia; and, above all, fear that war, if it was not rigidly localized, would become general and global.⁸

In drastically limiting such military aspects of the war, the Administration was only following Clausewitz's view of the political nature of war; since all relationships between states are dynamic ones, without this political direction war becomes uncontrolled violence. "As wars are in reality..only manifestations of policy itself...policy is the intelligent faculty, war only the instrument and not the reverse."⁹

It is interesting to note the senior military leadership in Korea, MacArthur, his subordinate commanders, and his replacement, clearly disagreed with the concept of limited war as reflected in their testimony before various Congressional Committees during and after the war.¹⁰ In fact, even the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee was convinced, "...that methods should be employed to eliminate political interference in the conduct of hostilities...."¹¹ This disagreement over the nature of the war is central to an understanding of the interaction between the civilian leaders in Washington and the warfighting commanders in the Far East.

CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Clausewitz wrote, /

"War is an instrument of policy..The main lines along which military events progress and to which they are restructured are political lines that continue throughout the war..If war is part of policy, policy will determine its character ..We can now see that the assertion that a major military development, or the plan for one, should be a matter of purely military opinion is unacceptable and can be damaging."¹²

Was civilian authority/policy ignored or usurped by the military as a result of the decision to invade North Korea by limited means? Did the civilian leadership abrogate its responsibility? Was there a crisis in civil-military relations?

While there were strong differences of opinion between Truman and MacArthur, which originated well before the decision to invade the North, the decision to change the nature of the war, to invade and destroy the enemy, to occupy his lands, to reunify the peninsula and to do it all within strict operational limits, clearly increased the tension. Yet, from start to end, US military action in Korea was clearly an implement of US policy and at no time was civilian control

over the military in jeopardy.

MacArthur, as the senior military officer in Korea, was not involved in the decision-making responsible for unleashing the UN force invasion of North Korea, which, in turn, brought Communist China into the conflict - the only two significant escalations of the Korean War.¹³ UN Troops crossed the 38th parallel on October 1, only after MacArthur had received a JCS directive four days earlier authorizing such a move. And on October 7, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution that, in essence, called for the reunification of Korea by force. The military merely executed the policy made in Washington to seize North Korea, which turned out to be perhaps the most important decision of the war. While Truman had numerous political reasons for selecting this option, from a military standpoint, after MacArthur's overpowering Inchon success, it may have appeared to be an easy operation. Certainly, MacArthur strongly encouraged it and the JCS did not question it; but then JCS attention had turned to rearming Europe now that victory in Korea was close at hand.¹⁴ In retrospect, it was a complex, high risk operation because there were plenty of signals indicating Communist China may well intervene.¹⁵ Yet, in 1950, Truman saw it as fairly easy, in line with Clausewitz's reflection that in military planning the complex often appears simple. As ordered, the military crossed the 38th parallel and, later, when the going got tough the orders from Washington surprisingly remained firm. No one in the Administration, including the JCS, reexamined the situation and revised the policy appropriately; violating another of Clausewitz's maxims that policy should be under constant revision.¹⁶

US political leaders and their policy had a profound impact on

the operational conduct of the war and the military leaders responsible for implementing it, particularly after entering North Korea. As Halperin notes, "The development of the limiting process in the Korean War seems to have been the work, on the whole, of the civilian decision-makers, in rejecting or approving requests by the military to engage in military operations which would have the effect of expanding the war."¹⁷ A comment by Clausewitz pertains:

"No one starts a war - or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so - without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it...This is the governing principle which will set its course (and) prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required."¹⁸

The US military objectives were changed three times in the first six months of the war. From the start, Truman intended to stop communist aggression, but he planned to do this through the intermediate objective of defending South Korea by limited means. However, even before the overwhelming success of the Inchon landing, he changed the intermediate objective to establish a unified, independent and democratic state of Korea through an invasion of North Korea and the "complete destruction of the North Korean Armed Forces," by limited means.¹⁹ Yet despite changing the course of the war by ordering an invasion of the North, Truman failed to heed Clausewitz's principle in that he was unwilling to provide the scale of means and effort required to achieve his riskiest objective. Later, he would again change the objective, reverting to the status quo ante bellum after the Communist Chinese forces intervened.²⁰ While MacArthur caused controversy over his frequent requests for permission to conduct operations ("hot pursuit" or splitting his forces during the attack north), he did so because he felt his military options were too restricted; as noted, he

did not support the concept of limited war. Thus, a situation existed where the military objectives changed significantly yet the President insisted on severely limited/restricted military options and the senior military warfighting leadership had profound differences in philosophy over the value, indeed the wisdom, of limited war. And so MacArthur's charge, "There is no substitute for victory." Even Clark, who "signed the armistice with a heavy heart,...believed that the war should have been carried to the Chinese mainland..."²¹

In retrospect, a most fatal error in civil-military relations was that Truman and MacArthur failed to accomplish what Clausewitz said was "the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make...to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking..."²²

Perhaps this error could have been avoided, as well as numerous other problems in the civil-military realm, if Truman had taken Clausewitz's suggestion that policy-makers maintain diligent consultation with chief military officials.²³ However, this did not happen and during their entire careers Truman and MacArthur met only once, on Wake Island, for a period of less than five hours.²⁴

This absence of personal contact facilitated a failure of communication between the two key wartime leaders which, in turn, created at least the appearance of significant problems in the civil-military sphere.²⁵

Whereas Truman did not heed Clausewitz's advice in his relationship with MacArthur, he did consult closely with his senior military advisors in Washington. But all these players were unwilling to question MacArthur's actions, particularly after his brilliant success at Inchon. Thus, it comes down to the issues of strong personalities, the politics of the time (e.g., the upcoming elections), and the accepted policy of not questioning the commander in the field (at least too strongly). In

the final analysis, the civilian leadership may have abrogated some of its responsibility more than the military took it away from them. Regardless, as James concluded, the President's exercise of his power as Commander-in-Chief when he eventually fired MacArthur should make it clear that the principle of civilian control was still safe and healthy.²⁶

- SUMMARY

Despite Truman's decision to invade North Korea and the subsequent escalation of the war, it remained a limited war, and in spite of the problems this created in the civil-military realm, the time-honored American tradition of civilian control over the military (war as an extension of policy) remained safe. However, the outcome may have been more favorable to US interests if the senior political and military leadership had better heeded Clausewitz:

- War is an implement of policy;
- Up front, establish the kind of war to be fought;
- Clearly know what you intend to achieve by war and how you intend to conduct it;
- Constantly review policy and revise it as necessary; and
- Political and military leaders must maintain close contact.

The relevance of Clausewitz's philosophy remains controversial. David Rees, a noted commentator on limited war, has written, "In sticking with a Clausewitzian policy of waging limited war as an instrument of policy, the Truman Administration (kept the Atlantic) coalition intact, repelled the Communist aggression and strengthened Western defenses...In retrospect this is the major Western political achievement since 1945."²⁷ On the other hand, General MacArthur's

famous words still ring loud: "Once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War's very object is victory - not prolonged indecision. In war, indeed, there can be no substitute for victory."²⁸ In light of the Vietnam experience, the debate continues. The fact remains, however, that limited war is an option, and the principles proposed by Clausewitz regarding its meaning and associated political-military interactions are pertinent and worthy of serious consideration.

- 1 Callum D. MacDonald, Korea: The War Before Vietnam (New York, 1986), p. 10.
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- 3 Ibid., p. 23.
- 4 Richard E. Neustadt, The Exercise of Presidential Power, in Korea and the Theory of Limited War, ed. by Allen Guttman (Boston, 1967), p. 53.
- 5 Neustadt, p. 53.
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- 7 David Rees, Korea: The Limited War (New York, 1964), p. 9.
- 8 Alvin J. Cottell and James E. Dougherty, The Lessons of Korea: War and the Power of Man, in Korea and the Theory of Limited War, ed. by Allen Guttman (Boston, 1967), pp. 79-92.
- 9 Rees, p. xiv.
- 10 Report of the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws to the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, Eighty-fourth Congress, January 21, 1955.
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- 12 Clausewitz, pp. 603-307.
- 13 D. Clayton James, Command Crisis: MacArthur and the Korean War, in The Harmon Memorial Lecture Series, Number Twenty-Four, US Air Force Academy (Colorado, 1982), p. 3.
- 14 Neustadt, p. 51.
- 15 Ibid., p. 59.
- 16 Patrick M Cronin, Clausewitz Condensed, in Military Review (Ft Leavenworth, August 1985), p. 43.
- 17 Morton H. Halperin, The Limiting Process in the Korean War, footnote continues next page

continued footnote

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Ibid., p. 579.

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Cottell, pp. 79-92.

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Rees, p. xiv.

21

MacDonald, p. 249.

22

Clausewitz, pp. 88-89.

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Cronin, p. 43.

24

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27

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28

Ibid., p. ix.