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INCHON AND LIDDELL HART'S INDIRECT APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

Long range bombardment, carrier battle groups, stealth technology, submarines, nuclear deterrence (embodied in ICBMs and SLBMs), tanks, air cavalry...and the list goes on. These machines, tactics and doctrines serve as the defining elements of how we think about war in the Twentieth century. They are the instruments of our strategic ethos and the fundamental threat of commonality among them is their ability to approach the problem of war in an indirect manner. Whether a system uses mobility and maneuver, or tactical invisibility, or the psychological menace of overwhelming destruction, each avoids direct engagement. B. H. Liddell Hart's book, *Strategy*, is the clearest baseline for understanding the indirect approach to warfare. Douglas MacArthur's Inchon landing during September 1950 is an excellent description of Liddell Hart's concept applied. This paper will examine the Inchon landings in light of the premises outlined by Liddell Hart. We begin with a brief review the situation on the ground in Korea, transition into an examination of Liddell Hart's strategy and axioms against MacArthur's strategy, and finally, draw conclusions about the applicability of Liddell Hart's theory as an approach to warfighting.

Before we begin analyzing Liddell Hart's indirect approach in light of the Inchon landing it is important to briefly describe the concept of indirect strategy. Liddell Hart spent much of his lifetime studying the military arts and in the process arrived at a basic thesis about warfare. He felt that "throughout the ages, effective results in war have rarely been attained unless the approach has had such indirectness as to ensure the opponent's unreadiness to meet it. The indirectness has usually been physical, and always psychological. In strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home."¹ As we examine Liddell Hart's indirect strategy and the Inchon campaign, a greater understanding of the parallels between Inchon and Liddell Hart's

¹ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 5.

indirect approach will emerge along with comment on a shortcoming in the strategy when applied in combat.

THE SITUATION

On 25 June 1950, the uneasy peace which had settled over a divided Korea after World War II came to an abrupt end. The North Korean People's Army (NKPA), numbering 135,000, and led by Kim Il Sung, shattered the early morning dawn with an invasion that hit the 95,000 member South Korea army like a bulldozer. "The Communist attack, masked by a skillful deception plan achieved complete strategic and tactical surprise."² The NKPA crossed the 38th Parallel with ten well equipped divisions supported by approximately 150 Soviet built T-34 tanks, well over 100 modern fighters and bombers, and a full array of large field guns.³ The Republic of Korea's (ROK) army, neglected by an American government intent on reducing its own military, found itself falling back from the 38th Parallel almost immediately. From the beginning, it was clear that the NKPA would soon unite the entire Korean peninsula under communist domination unless action was taken to stop the invasion. "At 10.45 pm on Tuesday, June 27, a resolution sponsored by the U.S. Ambassador, Warren Austin, was passed by the United Nations Security Council calling upon member nations to render such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area."⁴ The NKPA juggernaut continued to move south along the peninsula despite the call to arms by the United Nations. "Within 72 hours North Korean Communist soldiers were in Seoul and the shredded remnants of the ROK Army were in hard-pressed retreat down the long road southward."⁵ On 30 June 1950, President Truman ordered General Douglas MacArthur into the fight and U.S. troops from the 24th Infantry Division entered South Korea near Pusan on 1 July

² Hastings, Max, *The Korean War* (New York, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987): 52.

³ Heinl, Robert Debs, Jr., *Victory at High Tide The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* 3rd ed. (The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1979): 12.

⁴ Hastings, Max, *The Korean War* (New York, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987): 60.

⁵ Heinl, Robert Debs, Jr., *Victory at High Tide The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* 3rd ed. (The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1979). 14.

1950. Unfortunately, U.S. military down-sizing and parsimonious armed services support back home meant American troops were ill equipped to meet the NKPA challenge. By the end of July 1950, the NKPA had pushed the ROK army and her American allies into a 130 mile long redoubt around the Pusan harbor where further retreat was not an option. The NKPA continued to pound the ROK/U.S. positions in Pusan until September 1950 when Operation Chromite would turn the tide of battle.

STRATEGY

Most every student of military history can recount Douglas MacArthur's brilliant landing at Inchon Harbor in September 1950. Max Hastings, in his book on the Korean War, called Inchon "a vision of military genius undulled by time."⁶ Michael Langley, in his book, said "Inchon was a daring and brave conception, brilliantly executed and worthy of study as a precedence of amphibious excellence..."⁷ ROK/U.S. actions up to Inchon had either been delaying maneuvers, retreats, or fruitless frontal attacks. As one Korean War veteran, a soldier, put it, "the 1st Provisional Marine Brigade launched its legendary assault in the battle of No Name Hill. 'They went up in column of companies. They came back on stretchers in column of platoons,' he said. 'It was a magnificent thing, but out of another era--a typical marine frontal attack.'"⁸ Nearly a century had passed since the Civil War and still American military strategy called for brave men to march into the face of withering fire to achieve their objective. Liddell Hart felt that any strategy that resulted in this type of slaughter was flawed.

Douglas MacArthur's decision to use an envelopment attack through the Inchon harbor was envisioned very early in the conflict. "The Commander in Chief had first conceived the idea of assaulting Inchon from the sea as early as June 29th when, from an aerial view on the same melancholy occasion as when he had watched the capture of Seoul, he foresaw the over-attenuating lines of supply which the communists were creating for themselves. As the line

⁶ Hastings, Max, *The Korean War* (New York, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987): 99.

⁷ Langley, Michael, *Inchon Landing MacArthur's Last Triumph* (New York, Times Books, 1979): 21.

⁸ Hastings, Max, *The Korean War* (New York, Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987): 88.

lengthened, he would hit the enemy where they least expected it, and where better than at the nearest seaport to the capitol, Seoul, which was only 18 miles due eastward."⁹ Strategists in the theater and Washington were convinced the plan would fail and it was MacArthur's force of character alone that carried the concept through to execution. Liddell Hart's indirect approach to war perhaps best describes why MacArthur's efforts were both sound and strategically brilliant.

ELEMENTS AND CONDITIONS

Liddell Hart's fundamental elements and conditions of strategy involved movement and surprise. He felt that the commander's strategy should seek "to diminish the possibility of resistance" and "exploit the elements of movement and surprise" to accomplish this end.¹⁰ While this concept is immediately understandable, placing it into practice with your back against the wall, as was MacArthur's in Pusan, is extremely difficult. The element of surprise was achievable for one reason. The landing was considered impractical by the NKPA, hence why defend against the impossible. As Robert Heinl noted, the tidal ranges exceeded 32 feet, currents could run as fast as 8 knots, the harbor had very little sea room to maneuver, there were sea walls or mud flats not beaches to assault, and Wolmi Do island commanded the approach channels.¹¹ The tactical reasons for not going into Inchon were manifold. However, as Liddell Hart points out "surprise smoothes the path of movement by hindering the enemy's counter-measures and counter-movements," thus, in theory, giving MacArthur an edge in this difficult set of circumstances. Yet, the question remains, how does MacArthur, or any commander, reconcile the high tactical risks involved with this type of maneuver. Liddell Hart's theories answer this dilemma with the concept of strategic dislocation. He addressed the effects of strategic dislocation and what it entails. The commander needs to make "a move which (a) upsets the enemy's dispositions and, by compelling a 'sudden change in front', dislocates the distribution and organization of his forces; (b) separates

⁹ Langley, Michael, *Inchon Landing: MacArthur's Last Triumph* (New York, Times Books, 1979): 43.

¹⁰ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 323.

¹¹ Heinl, Robert Debs, Jr., *Victory at High Tide The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* 3rd ed. (The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1979): 14

his forces: (c) endangers his supplies; (d) menaces the route or routes by which he could retreat in case of need and reestablish himself in his base or homeland."¹² MacArthur's Inchon plan had all the elements which Liddell Hart deemed necessary to cause strategic dislocation.

As MacArthur noted in his 23 August 1950 brief to senior officers from Washington and the Pacific theater, "The bulk of the Reds are committed around Walker's defense perimeter. The enemy, I am convinced, has failed to prepare Inchon properly for defense. The very arguments you have made as to the impracticalities involved will tend to ensure for me the element of surprise "¹³ MacArthur knew that if the troops could make it ashore, they would significantly disrupt enemy operations. The NKPA would suddenly find itself fighting on a completely new front, where the troop concentrations were much thinner and less experienced than the main front. Further, this new front would immediately threaten Seoul which was where much of the NKPA logistics was passing through to the front. Finally, with all the difficult terrain in Korea, it was clear some part of the NKPA would have to fight its way north into the new threat, whether they were attacking on the new front or simply attempting retreat. The Inchon plan accomplished all the actions necessary to concentrate forces against the NKPA weakness to accomplish strategic dislocation. More importantly, the size of the forces involved reinforce Liddell Hart's observations regarding how such an attack should evolve. Liddell Hart noted "The larger an army, the more complex its organization, the more prompt and serious in effect is a menace to its line of communication."¹⁴ MacArthur both sensed and used this truth to aggressively lobby for acceptance of his plan. Inchon was one of those rare situations in history where an apparently surrounded force successfully achieved both movement and psychological surprise on a strategic scale. This combination, as predicted by Liddell Hart's strategic theories, proved overwhelming to the enemy. It is valuable to spend a few minutes looking at Liddell Hart's axioms and how his theory and MacArthur's operation match.

¹² Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 326.

¹³ James, D. Clayton, *The Years of MacArthur Vol III Triumph and Disaster 1945-1964* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985). 469.

¹⁴ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 326.

AXIOMS

Liddell Hart outlined eight axioms which support the principle of concentration and his strategic theory. Liddell Hart's first axiom called for the commander to adjust ends to means. Every operation must balance objective with "a sense of what is possible" on the battle field.¹⁵ MacArthur was convinced an Inchon landing was possible. The Japanese had done it several years earlier. During debates with senior commanders he made clear his understanding of the tactical challenges involved. "The Navy's objections as to tides, hydrography, terrain, and physical handicaps are indeed substantial and pertinent. But they are not insuperable."¹⁶ He had a clear sense of the achievable and was willing to accept calculated risks to win. While others doubted his ends-means calculus, he remained confident.

Liddell Hart's second axiom is closely related to the first. If a commander is going to accept significant risk in the ends-means ratio, the final objective must remain foremost while keeping plans adaptable to the changing circumstances.¹⁷ MacArthur had a very keen sense of the objective. "The vulnerability of the enemy is his supply position.. The several major lines of enemy supply from the north converge on Seoul....By seizing Seoul I would completely paralyze the enemy's supply system coming and going "¹⁸ Liddell Hart's discussion of this axiom brings to mind a tightrope walker. On the one hand Liddell Hart calls for the commander to be aware that "there are more ways than one of gaining an object" while at the same time he warns against wandering down "a side-track."¹⁹ This was the essence of JCS guidance in their lukewarm approval of the Inchon landing. They would have preferred a landing further south at Kunsan because it lacked the hazards of Inchon. However, one need only glance at a map to realize that

¹⁵ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 335.

¹⁶ James, D. Clayton, *The Years of MacArthur Vol III Triumph and Disaster 1945-1964* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co , 1985) 469.

¹⁷ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 335.

¹⁸ James, D. Clayton, *The Years of MacArthur Vol III Triumph and Disaster 1945-1964* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co , 1985). 470.

¹⁹ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991). 335

while Kunsan would support a safe landing, it would not support the ultimate strategic objective. The strategic objective was logistics through Seoul not a second front, safe landing beaches, or even relief of the Pusan perimeter...MacArthur kept the objective in mind and delicately balanced the ends-means ratio to achieve the objective.

In the third axiom, Liddell Hart instructs us to "choose the line (or course) of least expectation."²⁰ Until the historical archives of North Korean are opened, we will never know the extent of their surprise and dislocation at Inchon. What is clear from the record is that North Korean resistance was fitful and sporadic in Inchon and on the road through to Seoul. The NKPA had concentrated their 70,000 troops well to the south against the Pusan perimeter and were caught wholly unaware at Inchon.

Given this situation, MacArthur's landing forces could embrace Liddell Hart's fourth axiom and "exploit the line of least resistance."²¹ As the beach head positions were consolidated army and marine troops immediately began pushing through to Kimp'o airport and the outskirts of Seoul within four days. The tactical exploitation was excellent due to the complete strategic surprise achieved by the landing.

In the fifth axiom, we find MacArthur at odds with Liddell Hart's strategic theory. The axiom calls for the commander to "take a line of operation which offers alternative objectives."²² At the strategic level the decision to land at Inchon really left few alternative objectives other than Seoul. U.S. forces were too far from the Pusan area to open a second tactical front to that stalemate and a push north into North Korea promised little strategic reward. The ultimate objective to an Inchon landing was clearly Seoul. Had Inchon's tactical difficulties stopped or disrupted the landing, MacArthur would have lost the beachhead, suffered the destruction of his forces, and never attained his final strategic objective. Nonetheless, MacArthur accepted the

²⁰ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 335.

²¹ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 335.

²² Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian . 1991): 335.

higher risk levels and thus was out of consonance with the fifth axiom. This departure from Liddell Hart was equally true of MacArthur's plan when viewed in light of the sixth axiom.

Liddell Hart calls for the commander to "ensure that both plan and dispositions are flexible--adaptable to circumstances."²³ During the early planning stages, questions were asked about landing the forces at Kunsan or Posun-Myong.²⁴ MacArthur's staff reviewed the alternatives and arrived at the Inchon landing plan as most likely to succeed in achieving the strategic objective. However, it is likely that MacArthur's force of personality and strong desire to strike at Inchon may have caused the staff to only perfunctorily pursue alternative plans. MacArthur's staff adherence to the Inchon plan was clearly not in agreement with Liddell Hart at the strategic level. When applying the indirect approach in combat, commanders may find themselves unable to achieve every one of the axioms, thus accepting some level of risk in the process. Turning to Liddell Hart's two negative axioms, we find MacArthur once again in lock step with the indirect approach.

Liddell Hart admonishes the commander "do not throw your weight into a stroke whilst your opponent is on guard--whilst he is well placed to parry or evade it."²⁵ As discussed earlier in the paper, MacArthur's overarching aim was to use surprise and maneuver to off balance the NKPA. All his thoughts and actions were predicated on the fact that the NKPA had not built up a strong defense at Inchon. More importantly, MacArthur was counting on the NKPA believing that such a build up was unnecessary. An elaborate deception plan was initiated to convince the NKPA that the landing would take place at Kunsan (where the JCS recommended) south of Inchon. The Air Force began a bombing campaign to isolate Kunsan on September 5th. British forces began striking from Kunsan to Pyongyang, while ROK naval parties staged raids along the west Korean

²³ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 335.

²⁴ Heintz, Robert Debs, Jr., *Victory at High Tide The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* 3rd ed. (The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1979): 41.

²⁵ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 336.

coast. As the Inchon landing date approached the Kunsan raids reached a crescendo.²⁶

MacArthur made every effort to move the NKPA focus away from Inchon, thus preventing the NKPA from parrying his punch.

The final Liddell Hart axiom is important in understanding why MacArthur went to Inchon rather than reinforce the Pusan perimeter. The road from Pusan to Seoul was extremely long and MacArthur had found the NKPA an able and determined opponent. To move out of Pusan would have required difficult frontal assaults. Liddell Hart warns commanders "do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed."²⁷ While determined large scale attacks out of the Pusan perimeter had not been attempted, the retreat into Pusan had clearly demonstrated that the NKPA were determined fighters. To proceed back up the peninsula would allow the NKPA to consolidate positions and lines of communications, hence strengthening their defense. MacArthur agreed with Liddell Hart's eighth axiom and the need to avoid a "futile squandering of life in bull-headed assaults."²⁸ Overall, we find MacArthur and Liddell Hart, for the most part, in agreement on the indirect strategy of war. Further, Inchon serves as an excellent example of how the axioms help in planning a successful war strategy.

CONCLUSION: AN EXCELLENT FIT

Douglas MacArthur understood the tactical, strategic, and psychological importance of Seoul. As Heinl noted "Seoul, the ancient capital, is not only Korea's first city but the most important communications center in the country. The excellent railroad net left by the Japanese fans north and south from Seoul, as do the excellent highways...Korea's national telephone and telegraph systems radiate from Seoul."²⁹ Liddell Hart admonishes students of strategy that "in studying the physical aspect we must never lose sight of the psychological, and only when both

²⁶ Utz, Curtis A., *Assault from the Sea: The Amphibious Landing at Inchon* No.2 (Washington D.C., Naval Historic Center., 1994). 20.

²⁷ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 336.

²⁸ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 343.

²⁹ Heinl, Robert Debs, Jr., *Victory at High Tide The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* 3rd ed. (The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1979). 28.

are combined is the strategy truly an indirect approach, calculated to dislocate the opponent's balance"³⁰ MacArthur sensed the power of the Inchon maneuver. He knew Korea's center of gravity lay in Seoul and an attack where least expected, Inchon, would completely disrupt the enemy's resistance. In the period prior to the assault, MacArthur "bombarded the Pentagon with reasons for an amphibious assault: it would present the PA with a two front war, starve their troops, cut their communications, seize a large port, and deal the enemy a devastating psychological blow by recapturing Seoul."³¹ Liddell Hart best described the strength of MacArthur's Inchon plan when he wrote that a commander needs to "aim at permeating and dominating areas rather than capturing lines; at the practicable object of paralysis of the enemy's action rather than the theoretical object of crushing his forces."³² The lessons of this battle focus us on the strength of Liddell Hart's argument for the indirect approach. Inchon convincingly shows that "fluidity of force may succeed where concentration of force merely entails a perilous rigidity."³³

However, Liddell Hart's *Strategy* does not completely work through a critical part of the planning calculus associated with the indirect approach. Commanders may feel a desperate tactical position driving them to the indirect approach when little else seems reasonable. MacArthur's stubborn adherence to Inchon was strategically sound. Unfortunately, the operation's phenomenal success quieted the debate on whether Inchon was tactically appropriate. It is clear from MacArthur's statements, he felt an attack through Inchon to Seoul would alter the balance in Korea. He aggressively argued the strengths of an indirect approach. Yet, the tactical arguments against Inchon remain compelling even today. For the Korean War, the issue is moot...for students of strategy the question of risk remains important.

In choosing the "line (or course) of least expectation," the commander may feel compelled to take inordinate risks to achieve an indirect position. While it is implicit in Liddell Hart's

³⁰ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991): 327.

³¹ Manchester, William, *American Caesar* (Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1978): 573.

³² Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian., 1991) 333

³³ Hart, B. H. Liddell, *Strategy* 2d ed. (New York, Meridian , 1991) 333

discussion that commanders must calculate an operation's risks, greater emphasis by Liddell Hart is needed. In the Inchon scenario, what if...North Korea had done a better job mining the harbor approaches, or had better intelligence on U.S. intent, or had more experienced NKPA troops posted at Inchon? Given a slightly different tactical situation, the Inchon landing could have easily been one of history's great disasters. While, on the strategic level, Liddell Hart's indirect approach may allow commanders to avoid catastrophic head on confrontations, execution at the tactical level may necessarily incur significant risk. MacArthur understood and accepted this risk. Liddell Hart's theory needs to address the issue of risk in the decision process more completely.

In the final analysis, MacArthur's landing at Inchon remains a classic example of Liddell Hart's indirect approach to strategy. It demonstrated the indirect approach's great strengths at the strategic level of war. It also highlighted the need for risk assessment in Liddell Hart's indirect strategy. While MacArthur's execution at Inchon was not in complete consonance with all elements and axioms of the strategy, it exemplified the spirit of Liddell Hart's strategic vision. In the months following Inchon, MacArthur made grand strategy decisions which were terribly flawed and, today, remain the subject of great debate. These later unfortunate failures notwithstanding, Inchon remains one of the great military campaigns in American military history.

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