Section III:
Lessons from Field Missions

From War to Intervention: The Korean War and the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission

Dr Lydia Walker[@]

Abstract

In the Korean War's contested aftermath, a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (1953-54) handled the thorny issue of Prisoners of War who did not want to return to their own countries. General KS Thimayya, former Indian Chief of Army Staff, oversaw this prisoner exchange and resettlement program. His account of these events pinpointed how warfare had fundamentally changed since the World War II. In Korea, it was in neither side's best, long-term, and ideological interest to outright defeat, disarm, and occupy the other. Far from the unique, one-off experience it is so often portrayed, the Repatriation Commission showcased how the Korean War and its uneasy truce were a new type of international intervention, one where combatants sought victory without conquest.

Introduction

The armistice agreement that ended the Korean War in 1953 was neither negotiated nor signed by the South Korean government. In its contested aftermath, a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) (1953-54) handled the thorny issue of Prisoners of War (POWs) who did not want to return to their own countries that had recently been created by the civil war, Cold War divisions, and international intervention. Indian General Kodendera Subayya Thimayya oversaw the prisoner exchange and resettlement program. He and his staff had the

[@]**Dr Lydia Walker** is a Provost Scholar Assistant Professor of History at the Ohio State University, holding the Seth Andre Myers Chair in Global Military History and directing the Non-State Archives. She is a Faculty Affiliate at the Mershon Center for International Security Studies. With a PhD from Harvard and a BA from Columbia University, her research explores global decolonisation, international security, and counterrevolutionary warfare. She authored *States-in-Waiting* and has published in major journals. She has also contributed to Aeon and The Washington Post and received fellowships from institutions like Cambridge and Dartmouth.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CLV, No. 639, January-March 2025.

difficult job of providing buffer space from the pressure exerted by both South Korea (and its United Nations [UN] Command allies) and North Korea (and its communist Chinese allies), so that individual POWs could decide whether they wanted to return to their home country or resettle elsewhere.

Thimayya's posthumously published account of these events pinpointed how warfare had fundamentally changed since the World War II (WWII)[1]: In Korea—unlike WWII—it was in neither side's best, long-term, and ideological interest to outright defeat, disarm, and occupy the other. According to Thimayya, the war resulting in cold truce (which remains ongoing as of this writing) provided an opportunity for both the United States (US)-dominated UN Command and communist North Korea to attempt to win 'The hearts and minds' of their portion of the Korean population. Such an opportunity would have been foreclosed by the devastation of occupation and violent regime change. Far from the unique, one-off experience it is so often portrayed, Thimayya's 'Experiment in neutrality', as he characterised the NNRC, showcased the Korean war, its truce, and its aftermath as a new type of international intervention. This kind of intervention sought victory without conquest, becoming an antecedent for those to come in the era of decolonisation, the Cold War, and beyond.

From Kashmir to Korea

In Oct 1953, Thimayya arrived at the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) of the 38th Latitudinal Parallel, which he described as 'A piece of hell'. Because South Korea would not let the NNRC travel physically across its own sovereign territory, he and his team travelled by the US military helicopter directly to the DMZ. This mode of transport underscored how the US and the UN material supported the commission, even as it was led and operated by neutral nations and became a key moment for India to demonstrate what its neutral, non-aligned foreign policy could be within the violence of Cold War hot war.

The question of Korea, its war, and the threefold-role of the UN— As a forum for the international community to grapple with the issue; As the actual military command dominated by American forces; and As an entity in which the NNRC itself was developed—provided a key opportunity for India and Indians to intervene in the operations of global affairs. As the Cold War intersected with

anti-colonial struggles for self-determination across Asia, Korea became the highest-profile case of active dynamics across much of the Asian continent. Thimayya argued that the Korean War presaged a new form of war after the WWII, a form of warfare that was simultaneously sweeping across Malaya, Vietnam, and elsewhere, where 'The military is attempting to proselytise on a large scale'.[2] This was warfare as ideological combat, where victory did not require territorial conquest.

This was not Thimayya's first experience with such limited war in service of necessarily bordered nation-building projects. He had 'The same problem in (India's) Kashmir operation', where he was not allowed to follow militants across the Pakistan border and political restrictions from New Delhi constrained military strategy.[3] 'From a strictly military point of view', Thimayya could not prevent Pakistani 'Military equipment from reaching the raiders' as that would have required invading Pakistan. In Korea, the UN forces did cross the 38th Parallel into North Korea but refused to expand the sphere of war by invading China, a political decision which led to US General Douglas MacArthur's removal from command, since he virulently disagreed with it. Thimayya well understood the need for such political limitations on warfare by refusing to cross into an 'Enemy's territory for the purpose of getting at the enemy's source of supply'. But, in both Kashmir and Korea, 'The result (of such constraint) represent(ed) a kind of stalemate'.[4]

In Kashmir (as in Korea), the UN worked with belligerent states to establish a ceasefire line, though in Korea, the UN was itself an active belligerent and in Kashmir, this demarcation was hammered out at a meeting of Indian and Pakistani commanders at the 53rd milestone on the road from Srinagar to Muzaffarabad.[5] At this meeting, Thimayya knew most of the Pakistani officers from their shared experiences in the British Indian Army during the WWII, so, beyond high stakes and international boundary-making, this was an opportunity for 'Back-slapping and good natured banter', where the Pakistanis provided the 'Beer', the Indians 'Fresh Apples', and the official business only took 30 minutes.[6]

In both cases, the stalemate of a truce or ceasefire sufficed instead of the conquest of occupation and regime change, exemplifying Thimayya's depiction of how warfare had changed

since the WWII. If conquest was not considered politically feasible, advisable, or even (according to Thimayya) desirable in Korea, what then did each side expect to win? How did fighting such wars, where the traditional elements of victory were not part of the horizon of political possibility work for those whose job is to win a war, who believe that 'Their function in society is to protect (their) country from its enemies', i.e., for soldiers such as those who became POWs in Korea?[7] Can enemies be defeated without pre-eminently disarming them and occupying their territory? These questions that Thimayya posed articulate the shifting understanding of what political settlement war should—or could—produce during the first wave of Cold War and decolonisation conflicts.

The Changing Character of War

Thimayya began his exposition of the changing character of warfare by describing what war had been in the past. In this pre-history, defeating an enemy was different than overcoming their will to resist, which was why a nation could win a war and lose the peace.[8] Yet an enemy's will to resist increased by crushing a defeat they experienced, since defeat led to extreme vulnerability, a cause of increased fear, which itself was a source of amplified hatred.

This history of the changing character of war began before conscription and the modern nation-state, when armies were made up of mercenaries. Therefore, it was relatively easy for victors to cut deals with defeated commanders and their rulers. If rulers would not agree to rule their conquered people under the victor's terms, then the victor would simply replace them.[9] Thimayya himself did not make this comparison, but the form of pre-national warfare he outlined echoes mechanisms of British conquest of the South Asian subcontinent in the 18th and 19th Centuries. These imperial wars relied upon armies made up of colonial soldiers and alliances with and between local rulers. Thimayya was part of the first generation of Indian officers who served in the British Indian Army in command roles, so he was intimately aware of this history. These colonial soldiers, particularly the officers who had greater economic options, were sometimes even called mercenaries.[10] Following his imperial service and Indian independence, Thimayya was a creator of the 'New' independent Indian Army. Therefore, he had direct command and combat experience in both pre-

national/imperial warfare and war in defence of independent India's new nation-building project. Therefore, his strategic theorising about the changing character of war in *An Experiment in Neutrality* came from hard-earned, first-hand knowledge.

The issue Thimayya diagnosed—the political constraints that prevented armies from pursuing strategies which crossed national boundaries—was endemic to international intervention. During the Korean War, the UN and the US (essentially synonymous with each other in Korea but not in other circumstances) were trying to fight pre-national war in an age of extreme ideology, nationalism, patriotism, and communism. 'The Hostilities' in Burma, Indo-China, Malaya, Indonesia, and Korea formed a crescent of Asian revolution, where the aftermaths of the WWII rolled into decolonisation and Cold War conflict. These wars were 'Primarily Ideological' as the military objectives for those on both sides were focused on 'Capturing the minds as much as the property of the enemy'.[11] Victory hinged upon making people decide that belonging to new or newly constructed nation-states was in their individual interests, not in simply occupying and ruling their territory. The creation and work of the NNRC was example, symptom, result, and showcase of this form of war, where the mind of an individual became a battleground. Perhaps in Korea, the NNRC could have created 'A formula … for removing the violence from ideological conflict'. If that were the case, then such a 'Formula could be applied to the violent conflicts already raging in other parts of Asia'.[12]

Perils of Neutrality

Within such forms of war that were demonstrably—and even primarily—ideological, how could neutrality exist? By the end of Apr 1952, both the UN Command and communist North Korea (and its allies) had agreed in outline to a narrowly determined truce agreement that recognised the pre-war status quo, i.e., the 38th Parallel as an international boundary. The final issue that remained once the territorial stalemate was accepted was that of POWs: should they be returned to their pre-war country, by force or by choice, and how?[13] The NNRC was set up to handle these set of interlinked questions and India assumed leadership.

The NNRC was not the first time when India and Indians played a role in the international-legal recognition of Korea (North and South) through and by the UN. India was deeply concerned with the political fate of Korea, as well as of other newly independent Asian states, whose struggles Thimayya had linked together in his description of the changing character of war. The Indian government had been a member of the UN Temporary Commission on Korea that oversaw the 1948 election, which created South Korea. With its tragic familiarity with partition, India had also had significant qualms about the UN's failure to remove the 38th Parallel as a line of division between the two countries.[14] When the North Korean Army crossed the 38th Parallel into South Korea in Jun 1950, India's Ministry of External Affairs and its UN delegation had concerns over how the US used the term 'Act of Aggression' in its draft UN resolution, arguing that there was not yet enough information available to place unilateral blame on North Korea.[15] While he did send a field ambulance unit and later on, a signal Corps and members of the Custodian Force that protected the NNRC, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru did not commit Indian combat forces to the UN Command.[16] For these reasons, when the Indian-led NNRC took on the question of where and how POWs from both sides could choose to be repatriated, the South Korean leader Syngman Rhee did consider India a neutral actor. Rhee refused to allow the Indian-led mission to travel and operate on North Korean sovereign soil, so they had to fly into the DMZ and communicate with the UN Command at a distance in Tokyo.

The idea of repatriation is built upon the concept that an individual belongs to a nation-state as its citizen in the first instance. Yet the physical polity of the nation-state to which an individual as soldier, as citizen can belong—by choice, by territorial logic, or by force—was changing rapidly following the WWII, as well as the wars and partitions of decolonisation and the Cold War. In contrast to the general history of refugees as well as forced and coerced population transfers, Korean POWs were given a circumscribed choice: to join communist North Korea, capitalist South Korea, communist China, nationalist China/Taiwan, or a neutral nation that they could not select for themselves. Many of these polities had been newly constructed in the years prior, so how much sense of national belonging could, or should, an individual POW feel towards their prospective nation-state home? This tenuousness

of practical national affinity made the NNRC's job overseeing how North Korean and South Korean representatives presented their cases a key site for how the two countries made their own national claims. In this way, the NNRC became the frontline for Korean ideological competition, even though the truce had officially halted fighting. Competition for POWs' 'Hearts and Minds' served as a battleground in the long Korean War and as a key example of war's transformation from territorial conquest to international intervention.

In the circumstances of the Korean War, victory had to mean something outside of territorial governance and occupation. Therefore, what that 'Victory' could look like for each side was ideological, seemingly fluid, and up for grabs, even as their actual national options presented to POWs were quite circumscribed, ripe with misdirection and even propaganda. The NNRC did its best to combat these pressures, though Thimayya remained fascinated by how many POWs had 'Been persuaded to become in effect traitors'.[17]

Each POW entered an explanation room, maintained by the NNRC, their transportation handled by the Custodian Force, also under Indian leadership. POWs then listened to explanations provided by representatives from their pre-war nation-state on why they should return 'Home', and from their wartime combatant state on why they should choose a different country.[18] In political practice, these controlled encounters were messy and uneven, especially when pre-war relationships surfaced. One North Korean POW, originally from South Korea, refused repatriation. In the explanation room, the South Korean explainer was a friend of the POW, 'Who had been in the same (wartime) regiment. They greeted and hugged each other as old comrades would … The two men started to reminisce and to tell stories about the old days, and the prisoner made enquiries about his mother'.[19] Personal connections could be stronger than national ones.

As with Thimayya's experience with Pakistani officers following the discussions demarcating the Ceasefire Line in Kashmir, older connections that had been reordered or even severed by war included seemingly surprising personal affinities. These connections did not necessarily sway political decision-making, but they underscored how recent and potentially contingent new nation-states (and their boundaries) felt at the individual level. Back in

1953, no one would have predicted that the 38th Parallel and the surrounding DMZ would have lasted for decades as an international boundary. When they were constructed, they had not yet had the opportunity to structure daily life and national identity.

Conclusion

The Indian Ministry of Defence's official history of the Custodian Force in Korea, a contingent under Indian command that guarded and facilitated the NNRC's activities, considered their work the 'First international peace mission undertaken by the armed forces of independent India'.[20] This presents a counterpoint to general official UN chronologies of what came to be called as peacekeeping, which either begin with the UN Observer Missions in Palestine and Kashmir (1947 and 1948) or with the UN Emergency Force in the Middle East following the Suez Crisis (1956), the latter involving an Indian presence under UN auspices.[21] The Korean War sits uneasily within the UN's own history of its international interventions, since the UN Command was dominated by the US military. In Korea, the UN was clearly not a neutral actor invited in to prevent or de-escalate war, even as it supported the creation and efforts of the NNRC.

Indian Lieutenant General and head of multiple UN missions (a field commander in Congo, special envoy in Rhodesia, and head of mission in Cyprus and Namibia) Dewan Prem Chand considered Korea one of two 'Extraordinary' UN interventions—the second being the 1990 Iraq War. In both instances, the US troops were deployed 'In proxy operations on behalf of the UN'.[22] These two interventions bracketed the Cold War but did not extend into the post-Cold War era when the number of UN interventions dramatically increased. The Korean NNRC's experiment in neutrality may not have been replicated but the problem it sought to solve, of wars that sought political, ideological victory without territorial conquest and long-term occupation, grew in significance across the 20th and 21st Centuries.

Thimayya closes *Experiment in Neutrality* with the 'Lesson Learned' that the whole international concept of 'Freely' chosen (re)patriation was a boondoggle: the international community (the UN, North Korea, South Korea, and neutral nation negotiators of the truce that halted the Korean War) would have been better off giving POWs no choice at all, simply assigning them a national

home based on for whom they had fought. From this perspective then, the experiment in neutrality would seem a failure. Indeed, such a large repatriation program focused on individual choice was not repeated. However, managing the aftermaths of the Korean War provided an early template for wars that did not alter—or even seriously seek to alter—national boundaries. These wars sought victory without conquest, and over time, became the dominant form of inter-state conflict in the second half of the 20th Century and beyond.

Endnotes

[1] KS Thimayya, *General K S Thimayya's Korean Diary: Experiment in Neutrality* (Vision Books, New Delhi,1981), accessed 15 Jan 2025

[2] Ibid, p 23

[3] Ibid, p 17

[4] Ibid

[5] VK Singh, *Leadership in the Indian Army: Biographies of Twelve Soldiers* (Sage Publications, India, 2005) p 108, accessed 20 Jan 2025

[6] Ibid

[7] Thimayya, *Experiment in Neutrality*, p 18

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid, p 19

[10] Humphrey Evans, *Thimayya of India: A Soldier's Life* (Natraj Publishers, Dehra Dun, 1988 [first edition, 1960]) p 7, p 306, accessed 18 Jan 2025

[11] Thimmaya, *Experiment in Neutrality*, p 21

[12] Ibid, p 24

[13] 'Special Report of the United Nations Command', 18 Oct 1952 on 'The present status of the military action and the armistice negotiations in Korea', A/2228, accessed 17 Jan 2025

[14] Robert Barnes, 'Between the Blocs: India, the United Nations, and Ending the Korean War', *Journal of Korean Studies* Vl. 18, No. 2 (2013) pp 263-286, accessed 16 Jan 2025

[15] The Ambassador in India (Henderson) to the Secretary of State, 25 Jun 1950, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Volume VII, accessed 19 Jan 2025

[16] For the wider arc of Nehruvian non-alignment and international foreign policy decision-making in Korea and elsewhere, see Swapna Kona Nayudu, *The Nehru Years: An International History of Indian Non-Alignment* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), accessed 15 Jan 2025

[17] Thimayya, *An Experiment in Neutrality*, p 4

[18] Monica Kim, *The Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War: The Untold History* (Princeton University Press, 2019) showcases the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission as the final chapter in the wider context or interrogation and explanation rooms as battlegrounds during and following the Korean War, accessed 22 Jan 2025

[19] Thimayya, *An Experiment in Neutrality*, p 192

[20] S N Prasad and B Chakravorty, *History of the Custodian Force (India) in Korea 1953-54* (Historical Section, Ministry of Defense, India, 1976) p 104, accessed 25 Jan 2025

[21] UN Peacekeeping, accessed 28 Feb 2025 https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-history

[22] Dewan Prem Chand, 'Preventive Diplomacy' (unpublished draft paper), Dewan Prem Chand Papers, the *United Services Institution* archives, accessed 21 Feb 2025