

## **An arms imbalance revisited**

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In a 2001 book on the 1950-53 catastrophe in Korea's origins, George Washington University professor Richard Thornton analyzed the North and the South's egregious, bewildering and glaring arms imbalance – which preceded war's outbreak on June 25. He draws some shocking conclusions, and well-substantiated ones, to boot.

He noted “unambiguous tactical indicators provided by the truly massive Soviet arms supply” over the spring of 1950 “dramatically changed the relative balance of forces” between the newly established states.

But even as early as mid-1949, Thornton writes, there was a highly conspicuous paucity in the South's elementary self-defense capacity, which the Truman administration, although well-aware of the situation, “declined to redress.” This despite the fact the Korean Peninsula was freshly-divided into mutually hostile systems, and cynically madeover in the images of their ever-rivalrous partitioners.

Upon examination, the cruel sundering of the Korean Peninsula was by far the most ruinous calamity to ever visit the country – when measured by deaths. For what ensued was, point-blank, but an emanation. To illustrate, at least three million Koreans died in the 1950-53 war, an estimated three million perished in the 1995-97 famine-genocide within North Korea, an estimated one million have died within the North's prison camps. And this is without mentioning other directly related crises, such as mass human trafficking, millions of divided families and additional violent incidents.

“Although North Korea possessed a growing air force, the United States provided neither an air force nor an anti-aircraft capability to the ROK,” Thornton wrote.

“Although the North possessed a growing tank corps, Washington provided neither tanks nor anti-tank mines, the most effective (and most obvious) weapon to employ against tanks in Korea's narrow valley roads. Although the North possessed a large, long-range artillery capability, no comparable long-range artillery was provided to the ROK Army,” he continued.

“There were serious ammunition shortages in all categories of arms and the armed forces possessed only a ten-day supply of reserve munitions. ... although the North was increasingly attempting to insert guerilla forces by sea into the South, Washington provided no coastal patrol boats,” Thornton underscored.

And the professor of history and international affairs isn't the first to deliver these observations. Korea specialist Robert Oliver plainly disclosed over an interview for a 1988 documentary, "[Rhee] had no arms, to speak of. Lightly armed constabulary was all."

The late American historian wrote in "Verdict in Korea" (1952), with an atypical and refreshing frankness: "There has been a dismal lack of agreement as to what the war in Korea has been all about. In one view it has been a war to safeguard Korea from aggression; in this view, Korea should be a humbly grateful recipient of unprecedented assistance and should passively accept whatever is done for (and to) it without complaint," Oliver elucidated.

"From another point of view, the entrance of the United Nations into Korea was an essential step to safeguard world security and to attempt to recreate the United Nations into an adequate guardian of world peace. In this view, what happens to Korea is so secondary that it is impertinent for Korean spokesmen to attempt to impose their own opinions into a situation which concerns them very little," he explained.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who was a special assistant to President Reagan, wrote for a 2010 essay in the *International Journal of Korean Studies*, "Seoul could not even be provided with the weapons necessary to defend itself from the Soviet-backed North. In this way the Truman administration set up the circumstances leading to the North Korean invasion. ... when war came the North possessed a decided military edge."

"Through the spring of 1950, American intelligence watched intently as the Soviet Union shipped thousands of tons of weaponry to North Korea ... Washington ... refused all requests to provide additional arms, or upgrade South Korea's defensive capability," Thornton asserts.

Politicians submitted the excuse that the Rhee administration would attempt to forcibly reunite divided Korea if arms were given – low-grade whitewash which cannot justify such abhorrent experimental policies. As Thornton highlighted, "anti-tank guns, anti-tank mines, anti-aircraft guns, and coastal patrol craft could not provide the basis for an invasion of the North. They could only be employed in defense. Yet they were pointedly not provided."

Thornton contends that the provision of basic defensive arms to the South would have prevented war. He goes as far as to conclude that "Washington blithely proceeded to ignore the growing imbalance of forces on the peninsula because the Republic of Korea was to be the tethered goat employed as bait in a much larger game with global ramifications."

In the 2010 piece, Bandow wrote, "So obvious was the deleterious impact of US policy that some American officials actually predicted that the North would invade and when."

Oliver, though an American conservative, leaves one with zero doubt that grave and deliberate mishandling of Korea's situation occurred, determining "The Republic of Korea had been

restrained by United States and United Nations policy from ever preparing for the war. ... For the Korean civilian populace it was a misery of destructive cruelty unmatched on a similar scale since Carthage's elimination by ancient Rome."

Was the 1950-53 conflagration on the Korean Peninsula truthfully a native "civil war," inevitably bound to transpire due to murderous, unmanageable, pent-up enmity amongst Koreans? Professional historians today are rancorously split; catfights sporadically blow-up over such questions. One of the most objective and balanced Korea scholars, the late Gregory Henderson, was convinced Korea would have been spared war if not for foreign meddling.

He wrote in "Divided Nations in a Divided World" (1974): "Without outside intervention ... the rifts would have been those normal to many governments; they would not have been likely to generate separatism, and certainly not to force the creation of two states divided along or near the 38th parallel. ... Handled within the framework of one government, such potential conflict would have had far shallower roots and a narrower social base than left-right, communist-democratic divisions in other occupied states, for example, in Austria, where division was ultimately avoided."

Then was the war more akin to a "proxy war" wherein great-power rivalry and hostility ultimately finds expression in battle between respective client states?

In the award-winning documentary "Hearts and Minds" (1974), Daniel Ellsberg, a former Pentagon official and one-time analyst for the Rand Corporation, delivered this assessment of the Vietnam War's true character:

"A war in which one side is entirely financed and equipped and supported by foreigners is not a civil war. ... Basically, we didn't want to acknowledge the scale of our involvement there, we didn't want to realize that it was our war because that would have been to say that every casualty on both sides was a casualty caused by our policy."

Are there any applicable truths here to Korea? If you fancy not, you might be in denial.

Pyun Yung-tai, who was the ROK's foreign minister during the war, bitterly charged US officials with failing to treat Korea as an equal partner at its end. Pyun issued a searing indictment at the armistice, stating that America "had vented all its 'Machiavellianism' on Korea."

We owe it to all those who were killed, to all our citizens and to posterity to get to the bottom of what happened. All of our people must have a clear, unbiased and precise picture of our contemporary history. Otherwise, how shall the country ever become reunited, "free and independent," as was once guaranteed to our antecedents?