

Where US Omnipotence Fails: A Global IR-Perspective on the Agency in the Decision to Cross the 38th Parallel, September Until October 1950

Justus L. Pochhammer

About the Author

Justus is currently enrolled in the War and Conflict Studies program at the University of Potsdam. Prior to that, he acquired a M.Sc. in Comparative Politics from Radboud University in the Netherlands. In addition, he holds a B.A. in Political Science from Erfurt University. Justus' interest is in the interaction between conflicts, domestic politics and the use and organization of violent actors. He is primarily focused on the Indo-Pacific region.

To Cite This Article: Justus L. Pochhammer, *Where US Omnipotence Fails: A Global IR-Perspective on the Agency in the Decision to Cross the 38th Parallel, September Until October 1950*, Global Affairs Review, Vol. 4, Spring/Summer 2025.

Global Affairs Review Website: <https://www.cilpnet.com/global-affairs-review>

Published Online: 03 July 2025

Introduction

*“[The] United States is of course bound to give the main lead, by virtue of her power & her position in Japan & [the] F[ar] E[ast]. So far, with the exception of her decision to resist N[orth] Korean aggression in June (which I still think was right) she has hardly done or said a sensible thing over many months” – Kenneth Younger, 7th January 1951*¹²⁸

For a diplomat, these rather uncharacteristically blunt words belong to Kenneth Younger, at that time the 2nd in command of the British Foreign Secretary (Thorpe, 2006). With these words, Younger commented in his diary on the precarious situation on the Korean peninsula, as it unfolded in the first month of 1951. In early October 1950, an international force sanctioned by the United Nations (“UN”) crossed the pre-war border between the two Korean states at the 38th parallel. These UN forces, under the command of the highly controversial US general MacArthur, crossed even though the communist government in China clearly signaled through the Indian ambassador in Peking their intention to intervene on behalf of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (“DPRK”) if the UN forces would do so (Cumings, 1981, p. 737). At first, the UN forces advanced rapidly reaching the Yalu river at the Korean-Chinese border in mid-November (Appleman, 1992, p. 736) but experienced a crushing defeat thereafter at the hands of the Chinese People’s Volunteer¹²⁹ Army. With the third Chinese offensive, which just concluded at the time of Younger’s comment, the UN forces lost Seoul and had to retreat deep back into the South (Millett, 2007, p. 45). Even though the context is not explicit, Younger is likely referring to the decision to cross the 38th parallel as one of the unsensible actions of the US government. In his eyes, responsible for this fateful decision was the US government in general and MacArthur in particular, which Younger described elsewhere as a “menace”, “rash”, “thoroughly incompetent” and “totally disloyal both to the U.N. and even the policy of his own government” (Younger & Warner, 2005, p. 61). However, the UN force in Korea was an international coalition, comprising sixteen foreign countries in addition to the Republic of Korea (“ROK”), all ostensibly independent states with their own agency (Lee, 2015). This begs the question of whether the decision to cross the 38th parallel was completely the responsibility of the US, as Younger would likely argue.

¹²⁸ As quoted in: (Younger & Warner, 2005, p. 52)

¹²⁹ The moniker of a volunteer army in this context is a clear euphemism. These forces were regular formations of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army that were ordered to intervene in the Korean War by the government of Mao Zedong (Appleman, 1992, pp. 749–751; Millett, 2007, pp. 36–37).

Conventional wisdom suggests that the decision to cross the 38th parallel was due to a form of mission creep within the US government. As a matter of fact, this decision is used as an example to illustrate this very concept in the entry on “mission creep” in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia (‘Mission Creep’, 2024). Mission creep suggests that the scope of the US intervention into Korea increased over time which ultimately jeopardized the success of it. There are multiple reasons given in the literature why this mission creep occurred. Most authors agree that the favorable military momentum emboldened the US government to go further (Millett, 2007), whereas others point at US domestic political factors (Stueck, 2002) and again others connect this with the evolving Cold War strategy in the US government (Cumings, 1981). Regardless of the reasons, almost all authors see the crossing of the 38th parallel as a unilateral American decision that was made without input from foreign actors¹³⁰. This US-centric perspective is very much in line with the realist or hierarchical interpretation of the Cold War. Due to the stark differences in power between the different actors, realists in general expect that decision making be localized within the super powers and that this localization leads to less entropy within the international system and more moderate solutions (Acharya, 2014b, pp. 89–90; Midlarsky, 1989; Singer, 1989). However, the decision to cross the 38th parallel defies both expectations. On the one hand, this decision was connected to considerable escalatory risks and cannot be considered a moderate solution. On the other hand, the literature in general does recognize that the decision was accompanied by a great deal of indecision, uncertainty and chaos (Appleman, 1992; Nerheim, 2000).

As an alternative explanation, the literature on Global International Relations (“Global IR”) promises to offer valuable impulses that may help to solve the puzzles surrounding the decision to cross the 38th parallel. Global IR literature argues that traditional IR is dominated by Western viewpoints that may fail to properly recognize own biases and local context when applied to the periphery (Acharya, 2014b, 2014a). As such, Global IR strives for more inclusivity towards non-Western perspectives and theories to increase the value of scientific research. One of the specific key points of critique of Global IR is the notion that traditional IR commonly disregards the agency of non-Western actors to influence relevant decisions and shape the international system (Acharya, 2014a, p. 651). As noted earlier, the decision to cross involved numerous countries, too much to consider within one paper. Instead I will focus on the ROK as the major non-Western actor which provided about half of the UN combat troops for the Korean War (Appleman, 1992, p. 606). The decision to cross the 38th

¹³⁰ Cumings very briefly considered the diplomatic manoeuvres of Syngman Rhee’s government in the ROK and its impact on the developments in Washington (Cumings, 1981, p. 710).

parallel was at the heart of Korean interests and consequently it seems implausible that the ROK would remain idle. Furthermore, recent literature on power suggests that the relation between the US and its international partners in the Korean War may not be as one-sided as suggested by the realists. The concept of power as a disposition offers interesting insights into this dynamic (Guzzini, 2009; Morriss, 1987). In this paper, I want to reexamine *to what extent the decision to cross the 38th parallel by UN forces in October 1950 can be explained by the agency of the Republic of Korea and the US*. The thesis of this paper is that the US failed to localize the decision-making process on this issue in Washington. Even though the ROK was heavily reliant on the US in security issues, the data suggests that the ROK decided independently from the US to cross the 38th parallel and likely would have proceeded, if the US would back out. This independence of the ROK is the clearest when considering the preferences for post-conquest settlement, both sides envisioned. The ROK was able to establish its own occupation regime in the north against the explicit preferences of the US government. Even though the US must be considered much more powerful in comparison to the ROK on paper, in practice it was unable to utilize this power.

There are multiple reasons why this paper is relevant. From a scientific perspective, this paper offers a fresh perspective on an important issue that has historically been sidelined. By applying a Global IR perspective, this paper hopes to critically engage with the existing knowledge which has been dominated by mostly US and British voices (Millett, 2007, pp. 127–140). Even though this paper must rely on the existing US military and diplomatic resources due to language barriers, it strives to give more attention towards the South Korean preferences and agency. Furthermore, the decision to cross the 38th parallel received little attention in the literature¹³¹, despite it being a defining moment of the Korean War. From a societal perspective, this paper can give us insights into contemporary relations between the US and its local allies. These types of relations have been discussed extensively in the media in the last decades, especially regarding the US support of the western-backed government in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the Kurdish militias in Syria (Masala, 2022). The decision to cross the 38th parallel illustrates, in this interpretation of the events, that the agency of the local actors to influence developments should not be underestimated and conversely, the ability of the US to force developments should not be overstated.

¹³¹ The only article that specifically deals with this issue, that I am aware of, is Nerheim (Nerheim, 2000). When looking at larger volumes, Stueck's recent book on "Rethinking the Korean War", for instance, does deal with the question at hand, but is primarily concerned why the US ignored Chinese threats of intervention and not on how this decision came about (Stueck, 2002). Millet considers it only passingly (Millett, 2007) and Cumings dedicates merely about half of a chapter in his otherwise rather lengthy book to this issue (Cumings, 1981).

Context

The 38th parallel achieved relevance in the direct aftermath of the Second World War in Asia. Korea, formerly a colony-like possession of Imperial Japan since the early 20th century, was divided for military administrative purposes between the United States and the Soviet Union along the 38th parallel (Millett, 2007, p. 7). It is important to stress that the 38th parallel was not meant to create two viable puppet states on the territory of Korea. As a matter of fact, the 38th parallel did not even divide Korea into two continuous parts, but into three. The Ongjin peninsula, a considerable landmass in western Korea, was south of the 38th parallel but completely disconnected from the rest of what later became the ROK. This was not perceived as a problem, as the United States and the Soviet Union both intended in 1945 to rule Korea together in form of great-power trusteeship (Schnabel, 1992, p. 7). However, this shared rule of Korea was superseded by the beginning of the Cold War and two Korean states solidified their territories along the 38th parallel by 1948.

On the 25th of June 1950, the armed forces of the DPRK swept across the 38th parallel in a large invasion (Millett, 2007, pp. 17–34). The ROK found itself woefully outmatched and was pushed deep into its own territory by the communist forces. The United States, with the explicit backing of the United Nations, rushed troops towards Korea, but was only able to stabilize the front in the proximity of the harbor city of Busan¹³², in the far south of Korea. In August 1950, the DPRK achieved its zenith of control over Korea but reached one of the many turning-points of the Korean War. Under the command of General MacArthur, the US and the United Nations' coalition of the willing was amassing troops for a counter offensive. In September 1950, the UN forces penetrated the frontlines at Busan and outflanked the retreating DPRK forces with a naval invasion at Incheon, just west of Seoul. With UN forces quickly approaching the 38th parallel, the political decision makers faced a difficult question. Should they stop at this arbitrary line and preserve the status quo or pursuit the enemy across the 38th parallel?

Literature Review

The decision of the UN forces to go north of the 38th parallel in the counteroffensive has received in general only limited attention from the literature. Overall, the literature agrees that this decision was formulated by the US government in mid-September 1950 and executed accordingly by UN forces in the first days of October 1950. However, a more

¹³² In contemporary writing, the city is commonly referred to as Pusan or sometimes Fusan, due to different forms of transliteration.

in-depth look into the literature reveals significant differences in the interpretation of the events and the motivation behind the decision.

Allan Reed Millet's book on the Korean War gives an excellent overview over the war itself and the literature on it (Millet, 2007). In addition, it provides a concise description of the common wisdom on how and why the decision was made to cross the 38th parallel (Millet, 2007, pp. 36–36). Millet argues the US National Security Council ("NSC"), a top-level advisory body to the US president, first officially endorsed that the UN forces should cross the old border in its NSC 81/1 report from the 11th of September 1950. According to Millet, the main driver behind this decision was the military momentum of UN successes. President Truman, after a brief period, fully endorsed the report and gave orders to cross the parallel on the 27th of September.

A slightly extended argument is provided by William Stueck (Stueck, 2002). He puts the decision into a US power struggle between moderates that merely would like to restore the pre-war Korean borders along the 38th parallel and hardliners that would prefer to utilize Korea as a jumping board for a war against the People's Republic of China. According to Stueck, there are multiple reasons why the pendulum swung more towards the hardliners. Beyond the military successes already discussed, Stueck points at the high political standing of MacArthur, commander of the UN forces and outspoken hardliner, as well as the political struggle between Democrats and Republicans and the perception that a total victory in Korea could be achieved at very little cost.

A different perspective is provided by Bruce Cumings in his controversial book on the outbreak of the Korean war (Cumings, 1981). Despite usually attributing strong agency and heavy blame on the nationalist forces in the ROK, Cumings connects the decision to a Cold War policy change in the Truman administration from containment to rollback. According to him, the hardliners of the "China Lobby" saw the Korean War as an opportunity to rollback the communist regimes in Asia. Cumings argues that President Truman pushed some of the hardliners out of the government but in the end adopts their more radical policy in order to consolidate the domestic sphere.

However, there are several authors that question the linearity from the NSC 81/1 report to the decision to go north of the 38th parallel. In the US armies official history, Appleman describes the slightly confused communication between MacArthur and Washington in early October 1950 (Appleman, 1992, pp. 607–609). Even though Appleman shies away from

interpretation, the interaction indicated that there was a certain amount of misunderstanding or disagreement on the side of MacArthur in relation to his orders. Lastly, Steven William Nerheim, in one of the few studies that specifically deal with the decision at hand, makes a similar observation (Nerheim, 2000). He argues that President Truman stalled an official decision, to avoid a conflict with an anticipated decision from the UN on the same matter.

To summarize, the existing literature suggests that the decision to cross the 38th parallel was not straightforward. In general, the literature argues that the decision was embedded in a discussion between different groups pursuing different objectives and are motivated by different factors. Even though there is disagreement on the underlying drivers, the decision is seen by the literature at large as a unilateral American one. As it is common with many issue areas of the Korean War (Millett, 2007, pp. 127–140), the Korean themselves are granted very little agency in the development of the Korean War.

Theoretical Framework

Decision-making during times of war can be considered a special case that follows its own set of rules (Singer, 1989). These decisions are commonly associated with high stakes due to the fact that they will likely cost human lives and may potentially endanger continued regime or even state survival. In general, decisions are driven by past experiences on one hand and preferences for the future on the other (Singer, 1989, pp. 9–10). This is complicated by the fact that states are not monolithic actors, but are comprised of a variety of different individuals and groups with different experiences and preferences that influence the decision-making process (Singer, 1989, p. 9). However, during times of war, the expectation is that the decision-making process for vital decisions is localized into the hands of a selected group of high-ranking officials (Singer, 1989, pp. 11–12).

The decision to cross the 38th parallel is more complicated as it involves directly numerous other countries that likewise would consider the decision as vital. Most immediately, these are the commonly overlooked countries that provided military forces to the UN endeavor in addition to the ROK and the US. By September 1950, these were the United Kingdom, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Canada and France (Lee, 2015, p. 4). For this paper, I will only focus on the US and the ROK which arguably have the highest stakes in the decision at hand. Despite narrowing this down to two countries, this begs the question of which of the two countries were able to decide on this matter and to what extent it was reliant on the acceptance of the other country.

At its core, this is a question of power. Conventional wisdom suggests that the ROK and US are organized in a form of alliance. In the hierarchical equilibrium model, the alliance is a form of hierarchy that describes the association between a hegemon and a number of smaller states (Midlarsky, 1989). For our case, the US is the undisputed hegemon, arguably at its apex of power during the 1950s, whereas the ROK is a comparatively small, underdeveloped state at the periphery of Asia. In the hierarchical equilibrium model, the relation between the hegemon and the smaller state is one of one-sided dependency (Midlarsky, 1989, p. 57). This is especially true for a “steep hierarchy” such as between the ROK and the US, that has a large power difference between the hegemon and the smaller state. The US does not rely for its needs on the capabilities of the ROK, whereas for the ROK, the US is essential for continued state survival. According to the hierarchical equilibrium model, a steep hierarchy has two properties that are relevant for the case at hand, the “*minimum entropy property*” and the “*absence of alliance memory*” (Midlarsky, 1989, pp. 55). According to the minimum entropy property, a steep hierarchy minimizes entropy or chaos in the international system as the hegemon can centralize the decision-making process within its own country and may disregard the preferences of the smaller states (Midlarsky, 1989, p. 57). In other words, the preferences of a steep hierarchy converge on the preferences of the hegemon. In a similar fashion, the absence of alliance memory suggests that a hegemon in a steep hierarchy may disregard the experiences of the smaller states (Midlarsky, 1989, p. 59). The expectations of the hierarchical equilibrium model are very much in-line with other realist perspectives. Realists commonly perceive the smaller states as the hot-headed, radical local partners that potentially entangle the superpowers into an unwanted confrontation. Consequently, some realists argue that superpowers can exclude the preferences and experiences of the smaller states from the decision-making process and that this is beneficial as it leads to more moderation in outcomes and more stability of the international system (Acharya, 2014b, pp. 91–92). From this perspective, the US-centric explanation of the decision to cross the 38th parallel found in the literature seems theoretically justified, however the underlying concept of power in this argument is weak.

Since the 1970s, there is an ongoing discussion on different concepts of power (Hart, 1976). The conventional argument presented above is based on an understanding of power as control over resources. From this point of view, the power of a state vis-à-vis another state is determined by the amount of resources at the state’s disposal (Hart, 1976, pp. 289–291). Power is measured here commonly in the size of the economy or military capabilities. When

applying this logic to the case at hand, the US does seem to be much more powerful in comparison to the ROK. However, conceptualizing power as control over resources is not the unchallenged interpretation of power in the literature. Another possibility with interesting insights is the concept of power as a disposition (Morriss, 1987). The idea here is that power is the ability to affect actions in a certain context (Guzzini, 2009, p. 7). This context is based on the relation between the entities involved, as in individuals or states. Power depends on the preferences and experiences of the entity that is forcing something and the preferences and experiences of the entity that is being forced. Two notable aspects can be derived from this concept of power that are relevant for the case at hand. On the one hand, having the resources alone does not necessarily mean that power is being utilized. Power requires a context that is suitable as well as a decision, active or passive, to use power. It is, for instance, conceivable that the US may have had the ability to use power to force the ROK out of the decision to cross the 38th parallel but lacked the willingness to do so. On the other hand, the preferences and experiences of both the ROK and the US matter. There is a certain amount divergence necessary for power to be relevant. If, for instance, both sides agree on what ought to be done at the 38th parallel, the question of power is essentially meaningless as no force was being used.

Preferences & Experiences

Before reviewing the diplomatic and military events that unfold during late September to early October 1950, it is prudent to first consider the preferences and experiences that the decision makers of the US and the ROK had in mind, when they made the order to cross the 38th parallel. It is important to underline that the US not only pursued objectives in Korea that were directly related to Korea, or local preferences, but objectives that are tied to the Cold War dynamic, or global preferences, as well.

Starting off with the local preferences, it is important to underline that the ROK in the 1940s is not comparable to the economic and technological force of today. In 1945, the ROK was largely a rural country with an agriculture-based economy. Even though the ROK had the larger population in comparison to the DPRK, almost the entire country's meagre resources, energy production and heavy industry was located in the north (Schnabel, 1992, p. 11). The government of the ROK was headed by Syngman Rhee since the first general election in May 1948. Rhee is commonly described in the literature as an ultra-nationalist (Millett, 2007, p. 6). He formed a political alliance with conservative landowners, industrialists and former Japanese collaborators and their primary foreign objective was the eventual reunification of

Korea under the banner of the ROK (Cumings, 1981, pp. 185–208; Srivastava, 1982, pp. 17–33). The problem for the ROK was its disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the DPRK. The ROK was the economically less industrialized and poorer part of the country, and its army was considerably weaker than the DPRK army, which received significant support from the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union¹³³. Based on this, the ROK lacked the economic and military strength to pursue reunification on their own. However, unification could be achievable for the ROK, if they could garner the support of an outside actor, namely the US.

The local preferences of the US, however, were much more modest. The US, overall, had an uneasy alliance with the ultra-nationalist government of the ROK. The inclusion of former officers of the Imperial Japanese Army in many leading positions of the ROK army may have led to considerable irritations (Cumings, 1981, pp. 234–236). There are indications that the US may even have planned a coup against Rhee in October 1950 (Cumings, 1981, p. 715). The US local preferences can be described as a two-sided policy of “no forceful” reunification (Nerheim, 2000, pp. 2–3; Stueck, 2002). The US would support the ROK if the DPRK would try to reunite the country through an invasion, but at the same, discourage the ROK to pursue an invasion on its own. However, the US had no strong local interests in Korea. In addition to the economic weakness, Korea was for the US in the periphery of an area that was already sufficiently dominated by the much more potent US-ally, Japan. Key diplomatic figures such as George F. Kennan preferred a Japanese dominion over Korea and if not possible, an outright handing over to the Soviets, rather than an independent US-aligned Korea (Cumings, 1981, p. 714). This was certainly echoed by people inside the government. During a public event on the 12th of January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson ostensibly excluded Korea from the US defense perimeter in Asia (Cumings, 1981, p. 408). Even though the intentions and impact of the infamous “Acheson-Line” is still contested in the literature, the fact remains that Korea was considered, at best, a secondary concern by US officials.

The local level alone is unable to convincingly explain the US engagement in the conflict. For this, we must consider the global level. The US global preferences must be situated in the

¹³³ The DPRK could heavily relied on the material and manpower support of both countries. According to estimates, about a third of the soldiers of the DPRK army in mid-1950 were veterans from the Chinese civil war and as such had combat experience (Appleman, 1992, p. 9). From a material perspective, the DPRK army was considered “clearly superior” at the beginning of the conflict, due to a significant advantage in tanks, aviation and artillery (Appleman, 1992, pp. 17–18).

context of the early Cold War. In the ideological superpower competition between the US and the Soviet Union, the US was on the backfoot in the late 1940s in Asia. With the defeat of the Republic of China in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the US lost its strongest ally in the region and similar setbacks were feared elsewhere such as in Indochina, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Cumings, 1981, pp. 157–168). In this context, the National Security Council realigned the US security objectives in Asia as follows (NSC 48/2, 1949). The US priority should first have been to stabilize friendly non-communist regimes in order to contain communist influence. In a second step, the NSC envisioned that communist influence should have been rolled back by the US. In the context of Korea, a rollback of communist influence meant the destruction of the DPRK. The fact that the DPRK attacked first in the Korean War offered a situation in which a US rollback by military force may have been accepted by the international community. It should be noted that the call for rollback was not limited to hardliners, but rather a shared opinion within the US government in late 1950s (Cumings, 1981, pp. 709–715). In 1951, MacArthur noted in not-uncertain terms that “(the decision to cross the 38th parallel) had the most complete and absolute approval of every section of the American government” (MacArthur in Cumings, 1981, p. 713).

The problem with MacArthur’s statement is that it glosses over the significant differences in opinion within the US government of what rollback as an objective entailed. Unsurprisingly, this was the most striking for hardliners such as MacArthur himself. The hardliner’s objective was to cross the 38th parallel, extend Rhee’s government to the north of Korea, and potentially invade Manchuria to rollback communism in China (Cumings, 1981, pp. 711–716). The hardliners recognized that such extensive objectives may result in a general war with China and or the Soviet Union, but they accepted this risk due the perception that such a war was inevitable and that it would be preferable for the US for such a war to occur earlier, rather than later. In the pursuit of this objective, MacArthur was in close contact with Rhee and Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Republic of China, the latter of which even offered him 30,000 Chinese soldiers for the Korean War (Cumings, 1981, p. 712). Moderates in the government wanted to avoid a war with China or the Soviet Union over Korea and were not keen on extending Rhee’s government into the north (Cumings, 1981, pp. 709–710). Instead, they wanted UN supervision over the DPRK and eventually a pan-Korean election, which would preferably have resulted in an end to Rhee’s government.

To summarize, the local preferences of the US and the ROK starkly diverged from each other. The ROK needed the support of the US to militarily reunify the country, however, the US

was unwilling to provide this for a government that was neither particularly popular nor important. Despite this, the ROK was able to connect its goal of reunification with the global objectives of the US, especially those pursued by the US hardliners. The Korean War offered the US an opportunity to pursue a rollback against the communist regimes of Asia. Despite different perspectives within the US government on how this rollback should look, the ROK was likely going to benefit from this development. The main obstacle for the preferences of the ROK in the US government were the moderates. If the moderates could have gained the upper hand in the government and if they would have been able to establish a US or UN occupation north of the 38th parallel, ROK preferences would have been undermined.

Diplomatic and Military Developments

In the following, I will investigate the developments in summer and early fall 1950 that ultimately led to UN forces crossing the 38th parallel. To do this, I will look at developments in the UN, the US government, the ROK government and lastly reconnect this with the military situation at the front in Korea.

The first document to consider is from the first day of the war. On the 25th of June 1950, the UN Security Council passed resolution 82, which condemned the invasion of the DPRK and demanded a withdrawal of DPRK forces from south of the 38th parallel (Nerheim, 2000, pp. 6–7). After a quickly deteriorating situation at the front, the UN Security Council followed up two days later with the resolution 83, that authorized “(m)embers (...) furnish such assistance (...) as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area” (UNSC, 1950). For the US, in addition to several other countries, this was the legal justification for providing military support to the ROK which ultimately led to the formation of UN Command under MacArthur. There are two different ways these resolutions can be interpreted for the question at hand. At face value, the resolution did only authorize military means that were necessary to expel the DPRK forces from the territory south of the 38th parallel. However, during July and August 1950, a different interpretation of these documents asserted itself within the US government.

The result of this was the preliminary version of the National Security Council report 81, dated on the 1st of September 1950 (Nerheim, 2000, p. 15). This report called for the authorization for the UN forces to cross the 38th parallel. According to the report, this step was already legitimized by UNSC resolution 83 as the crossing was necessary to repel DPRK aggression in the long term. It was reasoned that the DPRK could otherwise rebuild its forces

and return at a later stage, after the UN forces had left the ROK. President Truman did not approve this report at first. Nonetheless, he did indicate a policy shift towards more extensive objectives when he underlined that the US would support the Korean desire to be free and unified during a speech on the 1st of September 1950 (Nerheim, 2000, p. 16).

The NSC reworked the report into 81/1, dated the 11th of September 1950, which many authors consider to be the “smoking gun” for the US objectives north of the 38th parallel (Nerheim, 2000, p. 15). The contents of the report, however, are less straightforward than expected. On one hand, the report noted that UN forces are committed to merely force a withdrawal of DPRK and that there is “a clear legal basis for such military actions north of the 38th parallel” (NSC 81/1, 1950, p. 6). On the other hand, the report stated that the US strongly supports the “*complete independence and unity of Korea*” as long as the Soviet Union or PRC would not intervene (NSC 81/1, 1950, p. 1). Overall, the report was primarily concerned with the threat of Soviet or Chinese intervention in different scenarios and explicitly noted that the “(f)inal decision cannot be made at this time concerning future course of action in Korea” (NSC 81/1, 1950, p. 4). In essence, NSC 81/1 elaborated on two different US objectives in Korea without clearly defining US preferences, priorities or giving the authorization to MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel. For all intents and purposes, NSC 81/1 can be considered a deferral of the decision.

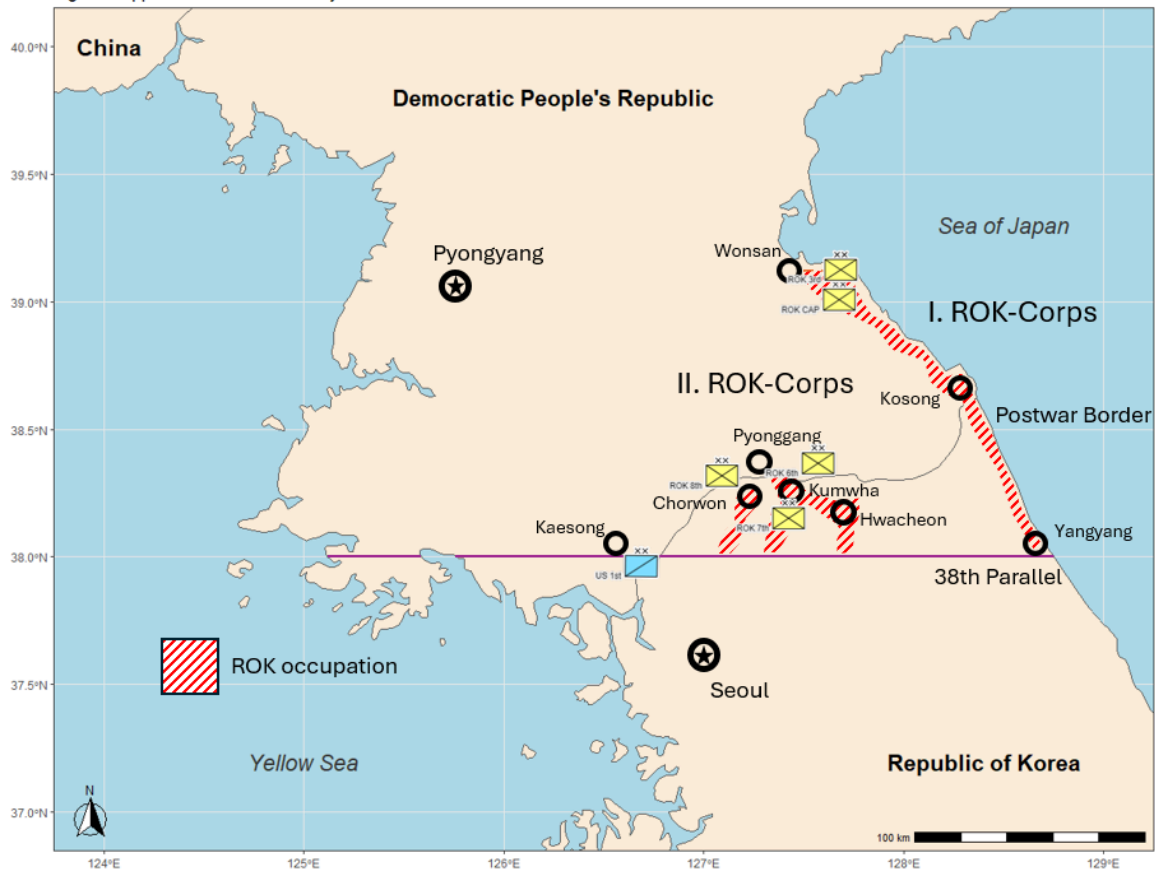
MacArthur received a draft of the NSC 81/1, which at that time still was not approved by Truman, on 15th of September (Nerheim, 2000, p. 18), the day of the Incheon landing (Lee, 2015, p. 70). Within the ROK government, the decision-making process had a different speed. On the 20th of September, Rhee declared that he was going to follow the UN decision on the matter of the 38th parallel (Lee, 2015, p. 73), however, Rhee also stated during a speech just one day earlier that he would conquer all of Korea, even without UN support (Appleman, 1992, pp. 614–615). The available information indicates that the 3rd ROK division was the first unit to receive the order to cross the 38th parallel on the 29th of September (Appleman, 1992, p. 615). Curiously, this was not reported by high-ranking sources but by an American colonel that was assigned as a liaison officer to this specific Korean division. Despite this author’s best efforts, the precise context of this order is missing.

Meanwhile, after a twelve day pause since receiving the draft, MacArthur received new guidelines from the Joint Chief of Staff (“JCS”) on how to proceed on the 38th parallel, generally confirming the content of NSC 81/1 but still with some caveats (Nerheim, 2000, pp.

19–20). The new guidelines stated that ROK civil administration should be limited to the south and that the decision on the objectives north of the 38th parallel was still pending. In addition, the guidelines still required that MacArthur would need the JCS's approval before crossing. This arrived at the same time that UN forces recaptured Seoul and generally approached the 38th parallel on multiple fronts (Lee, 2015, p. 76).

Around the 28th of September, General Walker, commander of the US 8th Army in Korea, announced to journalist that the UN forces under his command would pause and regroup at the 38th parallel (Schnabel, 1992, p. 183). This statement promptly triggered a personal message from the JCS to MacArthur encouraging him to feel “unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38th parallel” (JCS, 1950a). MacArthur, however, wanted to clarify his orders and issue an official statement to the UN forces that they would cross the 38th parallel in order to repel the DPRK attack, still mirroring the language of UNSC resolution 83 (CINCUN, 1950). Unsatisfied with his reply, the JCS sent another message, telling MacArthur in no uncertain terms to cross the 38th parallel without statement from his side or expecting one from the US government (JCS, 1950b). The stated motive behind this insistence by the JCS, was to avoid a pause in military operations and at the same time avoid diplomatic friction within the UN in the ongoing negotiations for a new Korea resolution. In the meantime, however, the ROK was not idle. The first ROK division to cross the 38th parallel was the 3rd on the 30th of September, followed by the Capital division likely on the 1st of October and then the 6th, 8th and 7th division on the 6th, 7th and 8th of October respectively (Appleman, 1992, p. 615). The UN negotiation concluded with resolution 376 (V) on the 7th of October, which stipulated that Korea should be unified and a pan-Korean election be held (UNGA, 1950). Despite being encouraged by the JCS to act earlier, the first US unit to cross the 38th parallel in force was the 1st US Cavalry Division on the 9th of October (Appleman, 1992, p. 623). At the same time, the ROK 3rd and Capital Division approached the southern outskirts of Wonsan, about 110 miles north of the 38th parallel. The other ROK division achieved considerable, albeit less impressive gains as well (See Figure I). The only ROK division still south of the 38th parallel was the 1st, which was under direct US command (Appleman, 1992, p. 616).

Figure I: Approximate Position of Major UN Formations on 10th of October 1950



Source: Map is drawn based on information provided by: (Appleman, 1992; Lee, 2015).

Consequently, at the time when the first US division crossed the 38th parallel, the ROK had already occupied a significant amount of territory. The ROK had established on their own an occupation regime in the DPRK. In numbers, about 2,000 ROK police men were already active in nine towns across the border with another 30,000 men in recruitment (Cumings, 1981, p. 716). The ROK occupation was accompanied by repression and political violence (Cathcart & Thrumble, 2023; Cumings, 1981, pp. 715–723).

To summarize, the ROK army crossed the 38th parallel nine days before their US allies. The existing evidence does not indicate that this decision by the ROK was coordinated with the US government. Instead, the decision was in line with the communication of ROK officials. President Rhee clearly threatened to decide on this matter unilaterally and the evidence suggests that he did. However, this does not imply that the US did not intend to cross the 38th parallel. The main question for the US government seemed to be who should occupy the north. The guidelines provided to MacArthur in late September 1950 made it clear that the US government preferred a UN-administered occupation of the north. However, due to the difficult international situation, the UN was only able to act on that on the 7th of October. By

that point, the ROK had already crossed, and the US was not prepared to provide an adequate substitute for the ROK occupation regime.

Conclusion

The decision to cross the 38th parallel in early fall 1950 was one of the defining moments of the Korean War. Fundamentally, this decision changed the trajectory of the Korean War by transforming it from a purely defensive war against DPRK aggression towards a more aggressive war to spread democracy and rollback communism. There is a certain appeal to interpreting this as a unilateral US decision. It fits well into the memory of Truman's notorious anti-communism in the 1950s and the US "crusading" attitude towards unsuccessfully spreading democracy in the Third World. This perspective, however, does not properly represent the developments surrounding that decision and the power dynamic between the US and the ROK.

Throughout the decision-making process, the preferences of the US and ROK commonly did not align with each other. Since independence, the nationalist government of the ROK under Syngman Rhee pursued a policy of military reunification with the north. Due to the distribution of resources, however, the ROK was reliant on the military support of the US to achieve this. Without outside influence, the US was unwilling to provide this military support as its interests in Korea itself were rather limited and there was clear ideological tension between US liberals and the authoritarian Rhee government. Contemporaries even referred to Rhee as "little Chiang", referencing the authoritarian Chinese leader Chiang-Kai-Shek whose corrupt regime was recently ousted to Taiwan in the Chinese Civil War (Cumings, 1981, p. 532). Luckily for the ROK, the US was interested in rolling back communism in Asia and the Korean War offered a permissible situation to achieve that. Even though both sides agreed in principle that the 38th parallel should have been crossed, disagreement existed on the question of who should occupy the north. ROK unsurprisingly insisted on a ROK occupation regime whereas the US liberals were keen on international supervision. The military and diplomatic developments in September and October 1950 indicate that both actors pursued an independent decision-making process from each other. Internally, the US was committed to crossing the 38th parallel and establishing international supervision over the north by late September. However, the US was unwilling to officially endorse this without UN backing, which did not happen until the 7th of October. The ROK was keen to cross the 38th parallel as soon as possible and strongly indicated that they would move without UN or even US backing. Consequently, the first UN unit to cross was the 3rd ROK division on the 30th of

September, nine whole days before the first US unit would cross. Similarly, the ROK produced a fait-accompli by establishing its own occupation regime in the territory they controlled. In other words, the ROK was able to shape the political situation quite successfully towards their preferences despite nominally being the much weaker partner in comparison to the US.

Going back to the British diplomat Kenneth Younger, he started off his critique on the illustrious failures of US foreign policy in Korea by noting that the US, “of course”, is predetermined to lead due to its power and position (Younger & Warner, 2005, p. 52). This perception of US omnipotence might be true at the UN headquarters in New York or the British Foreign Secretary in London, but not necessarily in the remote periphery of the Korean mountains. In the periphery, the local actors such as the ROK have the clear home turf advantage, and they will try to influence the situation to their advantage. The decision to cross the 38th parallel in October 1950 is a testimony to the limits of US power abroad.

Bibliography

- Acharya, A. (2014a). Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies. *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), 647–659.
- Acharya, A. (2014b). *Rethinking Power, Institutions and Ideas in World Politics: Whose IR?* Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315885346>
- Appleman, R. E. (1992). *United States Army in the Korean War; South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (June-November 1950)*. Center of Military History United States Army.
- Cathcart, A., & Thrumble, L. (2023). ‘Ignorantly Arrogant Souls’: Looking Back at U.S./UN Control Over North Korea in the Autumn of 1950 Looking Back at U.S./UN Control Over North Korea in the Autumn of 1950 on JSTOR. *Korean Review*, 19(1), 5–21.
- CINCUN. (1950, October 1). *C6115; Flash: MacArthur to JCS*.
<https://www.macarthurmemorial.org/483/Korean-War-Messages>
- Cumings, B. (with Internet Archive). (1981). *The origins of the Korean War*. Princeton, New Jersey : Princeton University Press.
<http://archive.org/details/originsofkoreanw0000cumi>
- Guzzini, S. (2009). *On the measure of power and the power of measure in International Relations*. Danish Institute for International Studies.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13433>
- Hart, J. (1976). Three Approaches to the Measurement of Power in International Relations. *International Organization*, 30(2), 289–305.
- JCS. (1950a, September 30). *Flash: Personal JCS to MacArthur ‘Blank Check’*.
<https://www.macarthurmemorial.org/483/Korean-War-Messages>
- JCS. (1950b, October 1). *JCS93079; Flash: Personal JCS to MacArthur*.
<https://www.macarthurmemorial.org/483/Korean-War-Messages>

- Lee, J. K. (with Internet Archive). (2015). *Korean War 1129 Abridgment: 1950.6.25-1953.7.27*. Seoul, Korea : WooJung Books.
<http://archive.org/details/koreanwar11291950000joon>
- Masala, C. (2022). *Welt-Unordnung; Die globalen Krisen und die Illusionen des Westens* (5. Auflage). C.H. Beck.
- Midlarsky, M. I. (1989). Hierarchical Equilibria and the Long-Run Instability of Multipolar Systems. In M. I. Midlarsky (Ed.), *Handbook of War Studies* (pp. 55–83). Unwin Hyman.
- Millett, A. R. (with Internet Archive). (2007). *The Korean War*. Washington D.C. : Potomac Books. <http://archive.org/details/koreanwar0000mill>
- Mission creep. (2024). In *Wikipedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mission_creep&oldid=1223931485
- Morriss, P. (with Internet Archive). (1987). *Power: A philosophical analysis*. Manchester : Manchester University Press. <http://archive.org/details/powerphilosophic0000morr>
- Nerheim, S. W. (2000). *NSC-81/1 and the Evolution of U.S. War Aims in Korea June—October 1950*. U.S. Army War College.
- NSC 48/2. (1949, December 30). *A Report to the President by the National Security Council; The Position of the United States With Respect to Asia*.
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v07p2/d387>
- NSC 81/1. (1950, October 9). *A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary; United States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea*.
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/national-security-council-report-nsc-811-united-states-courses-action-respect-korea>
- Schnabel, J. F. (1992). *United States Army in the Korean War—Policy and Direction: The First Year*. Center of Military History United States Army.
http://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA353574

- Singer, J. D. (1989). System Structure, Decision Processes, and the Incidence of International War. In M. I. Midlarsky (Ed.), *Handbook of War Studies*. Unwin Hyman.
- Srivastava, M. P. (1982). *The Korean Conflict; Search for Unification*. Prentice Hall of India.
- Stueck, W. W. (with Internet Archive). (2002). *Rethinking the Korean war: A new diplomatic and strategic history*. Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press.
<http://archive.org/details/rethinkingkorean0000stue>
- Thorpe, A. (2006). [Review of *Review of In the Midst of Events: The Foreign Office Diaries and Papers of Kenneth Younger, February 1950-October 1951*, by G. Warner]. *History*, 91(3 (303)), 479–480.
- UNGA. (1950, October 7). *Resolution 376; 'The Problem of the Independence of Korea'*.
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/United_Nations_General_Assembly_Resolution_376
- UNSC, 83. (1950). *Resolution of 27 June 1950*. <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/83>
- Younger, K., & Warner, G. (2005). *In the Midst of Events: The Foreign Office Diaries and Papers of Kenneth Younger, February 1950-October 1951*. Psychology Press.