

## Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950

*P. K. Rose*

**“  
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On 25 June 1950, the North Korean People's Army of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) swept across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and came close to uniting the Korean peninsula under the Communist regime of Kim Il-sung. American military and civilian leaders were caught by surprise, and only the intercession of poorly trained and equipped US garrison troops from Japan managed to halt the North Korean advance at a high price in American dead and wounded. Four months later, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) intervened in massive numbers as American and UN forces pushed the North Koreans back across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. US military and civilian leaders were again caught by surprise, and another costly price was paid in American casualties.

Two strategic intelligence blunders within six months: yet the civilian and military leaders involved were all products of World War II, when the attack on Pearl Harbor had clearly demonstrated the requirement for intelligence collection and analysis. The answers to why it happened are simple, and they hold lessons that are relevant today.

The role of intelligence in America's national security is often misunderstood. Intelligence information has to exist within the greater context of domestic US political perception. With the defeat of Japan, our historically isolationist nation moved quickly to lock inward again. The armed forces were immediately reduced in

number, defense spending was cut dramatically, and intelligence resources met a similar fate. The looming conflict with Communism was focused on Europe, our traditional geographic area of interest.

The war had produced a crop of larger than-life military heroes, and perhaps the biggest was Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Far East Commander and virtual ruler of a defeated Japan.

While many considered MacArthur brilliant, his military career also contained numerous examples of poor military judgment. He had few doubts about his own judgment, however, and for over a decade had surrounded himself with staff officers holding a similar opinion. MacArthur was confident of his capabilities to reshape Japan, but he had little knowledge of Chinese Communist forces or military doctrine. He had a well-known disregard for the Chinese as soldiers, and this became the tenet of the Far Eastern Command (FEC).

In January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson had publicly declared a defensive containment line against the Communist menace in Asia, based upon an island defense line. The Korean peninsula was outside that line.

Still, America viewed Korea as one of several developing democratic nations that could serve as counterbalances to Communist expansion. In March 1949, President Truman approved National Security

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# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE <b>2001</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2001 to 00-00-2001</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, DC, 20505</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <b>Studies in Intelligence. Volume 45, No. 5, Fall-Winter 2001, No. 11</b>					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>9</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

Council Memorandum 8/2, which warned that the Soviets intended to dominate all of Korea, and that this would be a threat to US interests in the Far East.<sup>1</sup> That summer, the President sent a special message to Congress citing Korea as an area where the principles of democracy were being matched against those of Communism. He stated the United States "will not fail to provide the aid which is so essential to Korea at this critical time."<sup>2</sup>

### US Intelligence Collection and Analysis

About the same time, US and Soviet troops withdrew from their respective parts of Korea. The Soviets left behind a well-equipped and trained North Korean Army, while the United States had provided its Korean military forces with only light weapons and little training. As US forces withdrew, MacArthur instructed Gen. Charles A. Willoughby, a longtime loyal staff member and his G-2, to establish a secret intelligence office in Seoul. Known as the Korean Liaison Office (KLO), its responsibility was to monitor troop movements in the North and the activities of Communist guerrillas operating in the South.

By late 1949, the KLO was reporting that the Communist guerrillas represented a serious threat to the

Republic of Korea (ROK). The office also noted that many of the guerrillas were originally from the South, and thus were able to slip back into their villages when hiding from local security forces. Willoughby also claimed that the KLO had 16 agents operating in the North. KLO officers in Seoul, however, expressed suspicion regarding the loyalty and reporting of these agents.<sup>3</sup>

These questionable FEC agents were not America's only agents in the North. At the end of World War II, then-Capt. John Singlaub had established an Army intelligence outpost in Manchuria, just across the border from Korea. Over the course of several years, he trained and dispatched dozens of former Korean POWs, who had been in Japanese Army units, into the North. Their instructions were to join the Communist Korean military and government, and to obtain information on the Communists' plans and intentions<sup>4</sup>.

These and other collection capabilities contributed to CIA analytic reports, starting in 1948, regarding the Communist threat on the peninsula. The first report, in a *Weekly Summary* dated 20 February, identifies the Soviet Union as the controlling hand behind all North Korean political and military planning.<sup>5</sup> In the 16 July *Weekly Summary*, the Agency describes North Korea as a Soviet "puppet" regime. On 29 October, a *Weekly*

*Summary* states that a North Korean attack on the South is "possible" as early as 1949, and cites reports of road improvements towards the border and troop movements there. It also notes, however, that Moscow is in control.

These reports establish the dominant theme in intelligence analysis from Washington that accounts for the failure to predict the North Korean attack—that the Soviets controlled North Korean decision-making. The Washington focus on the Soviet Union as "the" Communist state had become the accepted perception within US Government's political and military leadership circles. Any scholarly counterbalances to this view, either questioning the absolute authority of Moscow over other Communist states or noting that cultural, historic, or nationalistic factors might come into play, fell victim to the political atmosphere.

Fears of another war in Europe against the mighty Red Army and the exposure of Soviet spying against America created an atmosphere in which the anti-Communist fervor and accusations of McCarthyism silenced any debate regarding the worldwide Communist conspiracy. In addition, the Chinese Communists' rise to internal power created a domestic political dispute over who had "lost" China. The result was a

<sup>1</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers* (hereafter FRUS). (US Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1949), vol. 7, part 2, pp. 760-78.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Donovan, *Nemesis: Truman and Johnson in the Coils of War in Asia* (New York: St. Martin's-Marek, 1984), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> William B. Breuer, *Shadow Warriors: The Covert War in Korea* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), pp. 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise specified, references to CIA summaries are from: Woodrow J. Kuhns, *Assessing the Soviet Threat: The Early Cold War Years* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1997). That publication lists CIA reports in chronological order.

silencing of American scholars on China who might have persuaded the country's leadership that China would never accept Soviet control of its national interests.

### Preparations for War

Meanwhile, in early 1950, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung traveled to Moscow for a meeting with Stalin. They discussed Kim's plans to invade the South, and Kim asked what Soviet assistance could be expected. Stalin advised him to discuss the invasion plan with Mao Zedong, who also happened to be in Moscow. After discussions, Mao agreed that the South was weak enough to be conquered, and Stalin also approved the invasion.<sup>6</sup>

By the spring of 1950 North Korea's preparations for war had become readily recognizable. Monthly CIA reports describe the military buildup of DPRK forces, but also discount the possibility of an actual invasion. It was believed that DPRK forces could not mount a successful attack without Soviet assistance, and such assistance would indicate a worldwide Communist offensive. There were no indications in Europe that such an offensive was in preparation. On 10 May, the South Korean Defense Ministry publicly warned at a press conference that DPRK troops were massing at the border and there was danger of an invasion.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, translated by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 67-70.

<sup>7</sup> L.E. Stone, *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1952), p. 7.

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Throughout June, intelligence reports from South Korea and the CIA provide clear descriptions of DPRK preparations for war.<sup>8</sup> These reports noted the removal of civilians from the border area, the restriction of all transport capabilities for military use only, and the movements of infantry and armor units to the border area. Also, following classic Communist political tactics, the DPRK began an international propaganda campaign against the ROK “police state.” On 6 June, CIA reported another interesting international development: all East Asian senior Soviet diplomats were recalled to Moscow for consultations. The CIA believed the purpose of the recall was to develop a new plan to counter anti-Communist efforts in the region.

On 20 June 1950, the CIA published a report, based primarily on human assets, concluding that the DPRK had the capability to invade the South at any time. President Truman, Secretary of State Acheson, and Secretary of Defense Johnson all received copies of this report.<sup>9</sup> Five days later, at four a.m., the DPRK invaded the South. Both Washington and the FEC in Tokyo were surprised and unprepared. On 30 June 1950, President Truman

<sup>8</sup> The reports were noted in Congressional testimony that was made public. See Donovan, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Breuer, p. 40.

authorized the use of US ground forces in Korea.

### Faulty Perception

The United States was caught by surprise because, within political and military leadership circles in Washington, the perception existed that only the Soviets could order an invasion by a “client state” and that such an act would be a prelude to a world war. Washington was confident that the Soviets were not ready to take such a step, and, therefore, that no invasion would occur.

This perception, and indeed its broad acceptance within the Washington policy community, is clearly stated in a 19 June CIA paper on DRPK military capabilities.<sup>10</sup> The paper said that “The DPRK is a firmly controlled Soviet satellite that exercises no independent initiative and depends entirely on the support of the USSR for existence.” The report noted that while the DPRK could take control of parts of the South, it probably did not have the capability to destroy the South Korean government without Soviet or Chinese assistance. This assistance would not be forthcoming because the Soviets did not want general war. The Department of State and the military intelligence organizations of the Army, Navy, and Air Force concurred.

Washington's strategic theme also played well in Tokyo, where General MacArthur and his staff refused to believe that any Asians would

<sup>10</sup> Kuhns, p. 396.

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risk facing certain defeat by threatening American interests. This belief caused them to ignore warnings of the DPRK military buildup and mobilization near the border, clearly the “force protection” intelligence that should have been most alerting to military minds. It was a strong and perhaps arrogantly held belief, which did not weaken even in the face of DPRK military successes against US troops in the summer of 1950. It grew even stronger within military circles in Tokyo as American and UN forces pushed back the DPRK troops in the fall of 1950. By then, it had become an article of faith within the FEC, personally testified to by MacArthur, that no Asian troops could stand up to American military might without being annihilated. This attitude, considered a “fact” within the FEC and constantly repeated to the Washington political and military leadership, resulted in the second strategic blunder—the surprise Chinese intervention in the war.

### The Chinese Factor

CIA intelligence reports during the first month of the conflict continued to echo the theme of Soviet control of the DPRK, but they also began to address the potential for Chinese intervention. On 26 June, the day after the invasion, the *CIA Daily Summary* reported that the Agency agreed with the US Embassy in Moscow that the North Korean offensive was a “...clear-cut Soviet challenge to the United States...” Four days later, as President Truman authorized the use of US ground troops in Korea, CIA

Intelligence Memorandum 301, *Estimate of Soviet Intentions and Capabilities for Military Aggression*, stated that the Soviets had large numbers of Chinese troops, which could be used in Korea to make US involvement costly and difficult.<sup>11</sup> This warning was followed on 8 July by CIA Intelligence Memorandum 302, which stated that the Soviets were responsible for the invasion, and they could use Chinese forces to intervene if DPRK forces could not stand up to UN forces.

On the same day, the Chinese were also addressing how to react to a DPRK retreat. The first days of July represented the high-water mark of the DPRK invasion, and, by the end of that first week, US, South Korean, and UN troops were solidifying a defense line around the port of Pusan, near the eastern tip of the peninsula. Recognizing that the DPRK momentum had been blunted, Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou En-lai called a national security meeting to discuss strengthening the Chinese-Korean border area. At the meeting, it was agreed that the 4<sup>th</sup> Field Army, the most experienced PLA combat force, should be moved to the bor-

der region by the end of the month.<sup>12</sup>

On 28 July, the *CIA Weekly Summary* stated that 10,000 to 50,000 ethnic Korean soldiers from PLA units might soon reinforce DPRK forces. The article concluded, however, that there were no indications that the Soviets were prepared to use Chinese reinforcements. This blending of tactical warnings about possible Chinese units—first composed of ethnic Korean soldiers and then of Chinese “volunteers”—and strategic analysis that no indications existed of Soviet intentions to have the Chinese intervene, became the preferred art form for most Agency reporting through late November. It continued to be based on the perception that Soviet priorities and objectives would direct any Chinese actions.

By the end of July, tactical intelligence collection on the ground was becoming organized. Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA) detachments were collecting DPRK and Chinese communications, and US and UN forces were working with South Korean elements to debrief local residents and send out agents to assess DPRK positions and strength. Under the control of the CIA in Tokyo, Marine Lt. Col. “Dutch” Kramer established bases on islands off the southeast coast of Korea to train local irregular troops for missions behind enemy lines.<sup>13</sup> These activities quickly began to

<sup>11</sup> Guang Zhang Shu, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), pp. 58-59.

<sup>12</sup> Kuhns, p. 409.

provide valuable information. Chinese communications indicated in July that elements of a Chinese Field Army had moved to Manchuria, and that Gen. Lin Biao was the PLA commander who would intervene in Korea.<sup>11</sup>

By August, the Communist leaders in the USSR, China, and Korea recognized that the large-scale intervention by US forces would lead to the defeat of the DPRK forces.<sup>12</sup> This realization was particularly threatening to China. On 4 August, at a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo meeting, Mao stated that if the United States won in Korea, it would threaten China. Therefore, China had to come to the assistance of the DPRK and intervene.<sup>13</sup> This decision set in motion China's efforts on diplomatic, military, and propaganda fronts to defend itself from US aggression. While Mao's concerns were based on survival of his Communist regime in China, certainly a shared objective with the USSR, his motivation in acting had more to do with China's traditional concerns about its borders, and fears based upon previous US involvement with Chinese Nationalist forces, than it did with any Communist worldwide strategy.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Evanhoe, *Dark Moon: Eight Army Special Operations in the Korean War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> David A. Hatch and Robert Louis Benson, "The Korean War: The SIGINT Background," NSA Monograph June 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Juergen Domes, *Peng Te-huai, The Man and the Image* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Shu, p. 63.

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By late August, China was moving aggressively on all fronts to demonstrate its concerns regarding a defeat of the DPRK forces and US-UN occupation of that country. On the international propaganda scene, *World Culture*, China's official organ, featured an article equating a DPRK defeat as a defeat for Chinese policy.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Foreign Minister Zhou En-lai sent several diplomatic notes to the UN Security Council protesting alleged US air attacks on Manchuria just north of the Yalu river.<sup>15</sup> Domestically, Chinese media began to focus popular attention on the vulnerability of the Yalu river border area. And, militarily, PLA forces near the border area were strengthened in an overt show of force. By late August, FEC intelligence reports estimated 246,000 PLA and 374,000 militia troops were in Manchuria near the Korean border.<sup>16</sup>

On 8 September, the CIA issued Intelligence Memorandum 324,

<sup>14</sup> Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 86.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Charles A. Willoughby and John Chamberlain, *MacArthur: 1941-1951* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), p. 386.

*Probability of Direct Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea*, which assumed that the Chinese were already providing covert assistance to the DPRK, including some replacements for combat troops.<sup>17</sup> It stated, however, that overt assistance by the Chinese would require Soviet approval and a Communist willingness to risk general war. The memorandum concluded that there was no direct evidence of indications as to whether China would intervene, but it noted that reports of Chinese troop buildups in the Manchurian border area made intervention well within Chinese capabilities. It added that recent Chinese accusations of aggression against the Manchurian border area could be a setup for an imminent overt move.

This warning, one of the strongest issued by the CIA before Chinese intervention, reflected the analytic approach the Agency would stress from September to November: that the Chinese capability to intervene was present, but the political decision to do so hinged on acceptance of a worldwide conflict, which only Soviet leadership could decide. Meanwhile, General MacArthur was putting the final elements in place for another signature amphibious landing that would split the DPRK forces and force their retreat.

### **Military and Diplomatic Moves**

On 15 September, US Marines rushed ashore, captured the west coast city of Inchon, and began driving DPRK forces north toward

<sup>17</sup> Kuhns, p. 433.

their country. This strategic success was a clear signal that the invasion from the North had not only failed, but also that the DPRK forces could be destroyed by the US-led UN force. Two days later, a high-ranking Chinese delegation of intelligence and logistics officers arrived in North Korea to evaluate the military situation and prepare the battlefield for Chinese military action.<sup>21</sup>

By late September, China had sent numerous diplomatic signals expressing its concern regarding a US occupation of North Korea. The Acting PLA chief of staff told the Indian Ambassador in Peking that China would never allow US forces to reach Chinese territory.<sup>22</sup> The Indian Foreign Minister conveyed this message to the US Ambassador in New Delhi; in Washington, the British Ambassador passed the same message to the State Department.<sup>23</sup> These private notices were matched by a 22 September public announcement in which the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman issued the statement "We clearly reaffirm that we will always stand on the side of the Korean people...and resolutely oppose the criminal acts of American imperialist aggression against Korea and their intrigues for expanding the war."<sup>24</sup> Also during this period, communications intercepts continued to identify massive PLA troop movements from southern

and central China into the Sino-Korean border areas.<sup>25</sup>

### Discounting the Chinese Threat

In the face of these warnings, the JCS instructed MacArthur to continue his advance north to destroy the DPRK armed forces as long as there was no threat of a major Chinese or Soviet intervention. These instructions were based upon a National Security Council decision made before the Inchon landing.<sup>26</sup> The Secretary of State also disregarded these warnings, telling the press that Chinese intervention would be "sheer madness."

By the end of the month, the US Ambassador in Moscow reported that Soviet and Chinese contacts told both the British and Dutch Ambassadors that if foreign troops cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, China would intervene.<sup>27</sup> This specific warning was also repeated to various journalists, and on 29 September, the Associated Press in Moscow reported that both China and the Soviet Union would take a "grave view" of US forces crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>28</sup> Finally, at the end of the month, in a major public policy address celebrating the first anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Zhou En-lai branded the United States as China's worst enemy and stated

that China will not allow a neighbor to be invaded.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, these warnings were ignored, and US-UN forces continued to push the DRPK forces northward. On 2 October, Mao cabled Stalin advising that China would intervene and asked for Soviet military assistance.<sup>30</sup> Three days later, the CCP Central Committee officially decided to intervene.<sup>31</sup> US intelligence, however, continued its reporting theme that while Chinese capability was present, Chinese intent was lacking. On 6 October, the US Joint Intelligence Indications Committee stated that the Chinese capability to intervene had grown, but the Chinese threat to do so was questionable.<sup>32</sup> That same day, the *CIA Weekly Summary* advised that the possibility of Soviet or Chinese intervention continued to diminish. It also restated the belief that Soviet requirements would drive any such decision.

Two days later, the Soviet position was delivered to the Chinese. Stalin advised Mao that the USSR could not provide the military supplies and air cover over Manchuria that Mao had requested. He also asked Mao not to engage in a large-scale offensive against US troops, because such an action might lead to a war between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Shu, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> Kavalam Madhava Panikkar, *In Two Chinas: Memoirs of a Diplomat* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), pp. 108-9.

<sup>23</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, *On To The Yalu* (Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day, 1984), p. 198.

<sup>24</sup> Shu, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Hatch and Benson, "The Korean War."

<sup>26</sup> *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, Vol. 3, The Korean War*, part 1 (Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, Joint Chiefs of Staff), p. 230.

<sup>27</sup> Hoyt, p. 198.

<sup>28</sup> Stone, p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> *The New York Times*, 10 October 1950, p. 48-1.

<sup>30</sup> Shu, pp. 78-79.

<sup>31</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Day the Chinese Attacked: Korea, 1950* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), pp. 80-81.

<sup>32</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, "The Chinese Intervention in Korea, 1950," *Studies in Intelligence*, vol. 32, no. 3, Fall 1988, p. 56.

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**China Intervenes**

On 12 October, CIA Office of Records and Estimates Paper 58-50, entitled *Critical Situations in The Far East—Threat of Full Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea*, concluded that, “While full-scale Chinese Communist intervention in Korea must be regarded as a continuing possibility, a consideration of all known factors leads to the conclusion that barring a Soviet decision for global war, such action is not probable in 1950.”<sup>49</sup> So, both the United States and the Soviet Union saw any large-scale Chinese intervention as potentially stimulating a global war, and the US understanding of the Soviet position was, indeed, sound. Internal Chinese priorities, however, continued to be discounted by Washington, which still believed that the Soviets controlled overall Communist actions worldwide.

The next day, the CCP Politburo decided that China should intervene in the war even without Soviet military support. Based on this decision, it was Stalin who relented on his earlier request and agreed to provide military supplies against a Soviet loan extended to the Chinese. He also agreed to turn over Soviet aircraft in China to the PLA and to move Soviet air units into position to defend Chinese territory.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the Chinese not only made a unilateral decision to intervene for nationalistic purposes, but also intimidated the Soviets into supporting them.

<sup>49</sup> Shu, p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Kuhns, p. 450.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Through the mid-October period, numerous intelligence reports, including intercepted communications, indicated Chinese preparations for military intervention. The CIA reported that China was purchasing medical supplies abroad for future military activities.<sup>52</sup> CIA reporting from Tokyo, based on information obtained from a former Chinese Nationalist officer sent into Manchuria to contact former colleagues now in the PLA, stated that the PLA had over 300,000 troops in the border area.<sup>53</sup> And, on 15 October, a CIA-led irregular ROK force operating on the west coast near the Yalu river reported that Chinese troops were moving into Korea.<sup>54</sup>

All this information subsequently turned out to be accurate. On 13 and 14 October, the 38<sup>th</sup>, 39<sup>th</sup>, and 40<sup>th</sup> Chinese Field Armies entered Korea. The intelligence leadership in both Washington and Tokyo did not alert either President Truman or MacArthur, who were about to meet on Wake Island to discuss the conduct of the war. At that meeting, on 15 October, MacArthur told Truman there was little chance

<sup>52</sup> Breuer, p. 105.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>54</sup> John Toland, *In Mortal Combat* (New York: Morrow, 1991), p. 255.

of a large-scale Chinese intervention. And, he noted, should it occur, his air power would destroy any Chinese forces that appeared.<sup>55</sup>

The next day, the *CIA Daily Summary* reported that the US Embassy in The Hague had been advised that Chinese troops had moved into Korea. At this point, the analytic perspective of the Agency shifted somewhat. It now agreed that there had been numerous reports on Chinese troop movements into Korea, but it continued to believe that the Chinese would not openly intervene. The Agency also abandoned the position that the Chinese had the capability to intervene but would not do so, and began to accept that the Chinese had entered Korea. But it held firm to its view that China had no intention of entering the war in any large-scale fashion.

By 20 October, the Agency had developed another line of reasoning to explain the entry of Chinese forces in Korea—they were there to protect the hydroelectric plants along the Yalu river that provide power to the Manchurian industrial area.<sup>56</sup> That same day, however, intelligence reports citing massive numbers of PLA troops in the border region were also disseminated. Reporting from FEC

<sup>55</sup> Text of conference quoted in Richard H. Rovere and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The MacArthur Controversy and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Noonday Press of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), pp. 275-85.

<sup>56</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol. II Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 372.



Intelligence stated that 400,000 PLA troops were ready to cross the Yalu.<sup>41</sup> The *CIA Daily Summary* reported that a US military liaison officer in Hong Kong had stated that 400,000 PLA were to enter Korea. The *Summary* concluded, however, that the Soviets and Chinese were not ready to accept a global war, which any large-scale intervention would trigger. Apparently no one in either the FEC or the CIA thought 400,000 PLA troops a rather large number for a defensive force.

### Launching an Offensive

On 25 October, the first phase of the Chinese offensive began with the ROK 1<sup>st</sup> Division in contact with PLA units. Chinese POWs, interrogated that evening by US 8<sup>th</sup> Army intelligence officers, told of a sizable Chinese presence. This was reported to FEC G-2.<sup>42</sup> Within the next two days, PLA units decimated two regiments of the ROK 6<sup>th</sup> Division and forced the ROK II Corps into general retreat. Yet, on 28 October, the *CIA Daily Summary* stated that only small, independent Chinese units were fighting in Korea. It totally discounted the possibility that major Chinese forces were present. By 29 October, South Korean units on both coasts captured Chinese from regimental-sized PLA units, and these prisoners convinced X Corps intelligence that the Chinese were being committed to battle as units,

rather than as replacements for DPRK losses.<sup>43</sup> That same day, however, the *FEC Intelligence Summary* advised that Chinese forces had little combat potential against a modern army.<sup>44</sup> While this view was acceptable in Tokyo and Washington, combat units in Korea were considerably less comfortable with it.

During the next two days, Tokyo and Washington continued to doubt the intelligence reports from the front. On 30 October, MacArthur's G-2, General Willoughby, flew from Tokyo to X Corps Headquarters to personally interview 16 Chinese POWs. After this session, he pronounced them to be "stragglers" rather than members of an organized PLA unit.<sup>45</sup> That same day, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army reported that 10 separate Chinese POWs stated that several PLA divisions were now in Korea. While reporting this in its *Daily Summary*, CIA restated its belief that Chinese intervention was unlikely, and that these troops could be protecting the hydroelectric plants essential to the Manchurian economy. The following day, the *CIA Daily Summary* carried a report from the 8<sup>th</sup> Army stating that its elements were in contact with two PLA regiments, and that a POW claimed the Chinese entered Korea on 16 October. The Agency commented that while small numbers of Chinese troops were operating in Korea, it did not believe this indicated Chinese

intent to intervene openly or directly in the war.

### Admitting the Obvious

By early November, field reports from Korea could no longer be ignored in Tokyo and Washington. In addition to POW reporting from both the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and X Corps, Marine Corps pilots reported massive truck convoys moving from Manchuria into Korea.<sup>46</sup> Also, a regiment of the 1<sup>st</sup> US Cavalry Division, the first American unit to engage the PLA, took heavy casualties. By 4 November, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry identified five PLA divisions opposing it, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division identified three PLA divisions operating against it.<sup>47</sup> Intercepted Chinese communications disclosed an order for 30,000 maps of Korea for the forces in Manchuria; US Army military intelligence estimated these were enough maps for 30 PLA divisions.<sup>48</sup>

FEC's G-2 finally acknowledged that the Chinese were in Korea in force. But Willoughby continued to claim these forces did not represent official Chinese intervention.<sup>49</sup> By 3 November, FEC had raised its estimate of Chinese strength in Korea to 34,000, backed by reserves in Manchuria of

<sup>41</sup> Lynn Montross and Nicholas Canzona, *US Marine Operations in Korea* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 124.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Lichterman, "To the Yalu and Back," in Harold Stein, *American Civil-Military Decisions* (Birmingham, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1963), p. 601.

<sup>43</sup> Hatch and Benson, "The Korean War."

<sup>44</sup> Spanier, p. 117.

<sup>45</sup> Roy Edger Appleman, *United States Army in the Korean War* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1960), p. 761.

<sup>46</sup> Hoyt, *The Day the Chinese Attacked*, p. 95.

<sup>47</sup> Appleman, p. 755.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), pp. 287-88.

<sup>49</sup> Breuer, p. 108.

498,000 PLA soldiers and 370,000 Chinese security troops.<sup>50</sup> The *CLA Weekly Summary* of that date estimated a similar number of Chinese troops actually in Korea, but continued to take the position that China's intention was to protect the Manchurian border and its hydro-electric plants.

Finally, on 5 November, Willoughby admitted that Chinese forces in Korea had the potential to conduct a large-scale counteroffensive. Later that day, however, MacArthur advised the JCS that he still did not believe the Chinese would enter the war in force.<sup>51</sup>

### A Brief Respite

Between 4 and 5 November, the Chinese forces broke contact and melted back into the countryside. This respite provided an opportunity for Tokyo and Washington to evaluate the situation and assess the nature and size of the Chinese threat. MacArthur advised that while the Chinese had not intervened in force, their strength in Korea could force a retreat of his troops.<sup>52</sup> This seemingly

<sup>50</sup> Appleman, p. 762.

<sup>51</sup> Hoyt, *On to Victory at the Yalu*, p. 264.

<sup>52</sup> Truman, p. 377.

“  
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 ”

contradictory message caused some confusion among the Washington military leadership. Meanwhile, Kim Il-sung publicly admitted that Chinese troops were fighting in Korea, and a *New York Times* article on 6 November said that the New China News Agency had reported that China had “volunteers” fighting there. Reliable Chinese Nationalist sources also reported that China was preparing for large-scale combat operations against the UN forces.<sup>53</sup>

On 14 November, *The New York Times* reported that the Soviet press described the Chinese as ready to destroy any force which posed a threat to China, and on 16 November the newspaper reported that Chinese troops were moving into Korea in large numbers, and that even more troops would follow. Intelligence from the 8<sup>th</sup> Army also reported massive buildups of

<sup>53</sup> Cohen, p. 58.

Chinese forces on both sides of the Korean-Chinese border.<sup>54</sup>

By mid-November, FEC reported that 12 PLA divisions had been identified in Korea.<sup>55</sup> On 24 November, however, National Intelligence Estimate 2/1 stated that China had the capability for large-scale offensive operations but that there were no indications such an offensive was in the offing.<sup>56</sup> That same day, the second Chinese offensive started, leaving the 8<sup>th</sup> Army fighting for its life and most of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division surrounded and threatened with annihilation.

It took several days for MacArthur and his staff to face the fact that his “end of the war” offensive toward the Yalu was over and victory was not near. Finally, on 28 November, MacArthur reported that he faced 200,000 PLA troops and a completely new war. MacArthur again had the numbers significantly wrong, but he got the “new war” part right.

<sup>54</sup> Hoyt, *The Day the Chinese Attacked*, p. 122.

<sup>55</sup> Montross and Canzona, p. 129.

<sup>56</sup> *FRICTS*, pp. 1220-22.