

The Land of the Morning Calm



Weapons are tools of ill omen.

—Sun-tzu
Chinese military theorist,
ca. 350 B.C.

Background

The Korean Armistice Agreement of 27 July 1953 suspended large-scale conventional fighting in Korea after more than three years of bloody warfare. This instrument, “purely military in character” by its own verbiage, sought to “insure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed forces in Korea until a final peaceful settlement [was] achieved.”¹ The 1954 Geneva Conference ended without a political settlement on Korea. To date, only the most tentative steps have been taken toward peaceful resolution of the impasse.

During most of the decade after the armistice, both the North Korean Communists and the Republic of Korea continued to press claims for reunification under their respective banners. Premier Kim Il-sung of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) presented many proposals for a united peninsula, each predicated upon termination of the existing South Korean government. President Syngman Rhee preferred to talk of “unification by marching northward.” Each Korea rejected the other’s plans.² Due to wartime damage and the moderating influence of their powerful Chinese and American allies, neither the north nor the south attempted to take serious steps toward implementing their reunification schemes.

This relatively stable situation began to change by the start of the second postwar decade. For both Koreas, but especially for the militant north, the mid-1960s represented a period of particular opportunities and perils. A succession of interrelated events in the two states laid the foundation for the Second Korean Conflict.

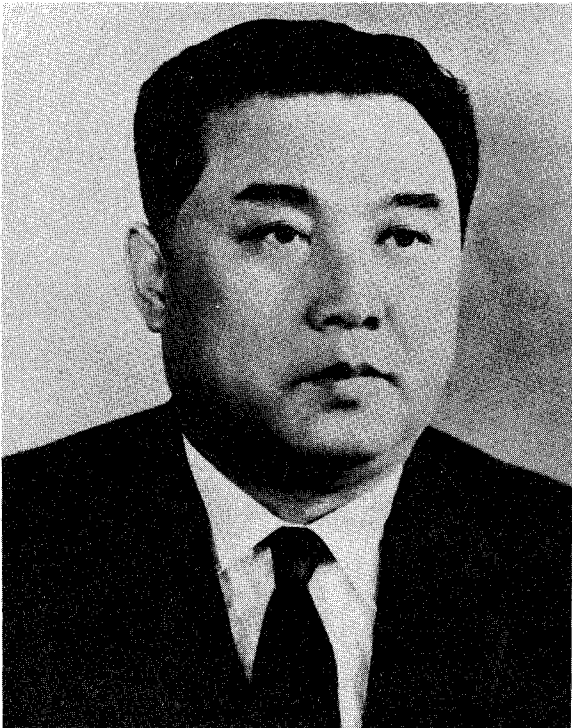
In the DPRK, the departure of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army by October 1958 gave Kim Il-sung a free hand to do things his way. Thus, he completed the consolidation of his domestic authority in a series of discrete

purges in the upper echelons of his Korean Workers' Party (KWP). Kim followed the Chinese model for his *Chollima* (Flying Horse) plan, a crash program of collectivized agriculture and forced industrialization. His goal, simply stated, was "the fortification of the entire country" as a base for reunifying Korea by force.

But Kim could not do the job alone. He needed advanced Soviet technology and advice to build a powerful industrial state, but he depended on the Chinese for more immediate agricultural assistance. Reliance on these two sources became especially difficult in light of the increasingly heated disagreements between the two Communist giants. Like the rest of the lesser Communist states, the DPRK felt pressured to take a side in the ideological bickering between Nikita S. Khrushchev of the USSR and Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) of China.

Given North Korea's pivotal geographic position, recent role in the struggle against the Americans, and economic requirements, Kim Il-sung could not afford to alienate either of his mighty sponsors. Although he attempted to chart a middle course, he failed. The Soviets suspended aid to him in December 1962, charging that the DPRK had leaned too far toward the Chinese.³

While Kim Il-sung tried to build a mobilization base with the help of squabbling allies, Syngman Rhee of the ROK dealt with his own challenges. Aid from the United States and other United Nations countries allowed



Premier Kim Il-sung of the Democratic
People's Republic of Korea

South Korea to rebuild rapidly. Its gross national product grew at an annual rate of 5.5 percent during the mid-1950s. Industry led the way, expanding at an astounding 14 percent yearly. The elderly Rhee proved unable to cope with the social upheavals caused by this economic upsurge. Charged with electoral corruption in April 1960, Rhee resigned in the face of widespread civil disorder, popularized as the Student Revolution.

Following a brief, confused period of rule by fragmented opposition factions, Major General Park Chung Hee assumed power through a coup d'état in May 1961. Park and his junta exercised supreme powers until August 1963, when Park was elected president. Despite the political turnover, the ROK economy continued to burgeon, led by the industrial sector.⁴

What did the northern Communist leadership make of these developments? As far as can be told from available open sources, Kim Il-sung drew three conclusions as early as December 1962. First, the ROK economy and population were already twice as large as those of North Korea. Obvious trend lines indicated that the disparity, especially in the economic realm, would increase over time. Second, the Park government represented a unique threat. Although nominally "civil" after the 1963 elections, Park and his circle of military men could be expected to display strategic vision far beyond that of the Rhee administration. Park's emphasis on accelerated industrial growth underscored his commitment to military strength. In league with the ROK's already expanding economic advantage over the DPRK, Park's calculated catalysis of industry promised to furnish the means for South Korea to conduct the march to the north so often threatened by Rhee. Third, the economic boom in the south had spawned serious dissent in the Republic of Korea. In 1960-61, the DPRK had been unready to exploit the unsettled situation or take direct action.⁵ Because the Soviet aid needed for conventional combat was suspended, Kim Il-sung wondered if there was an opportunity for him to bring about reunification through unconventional war.

Kim thought so. On 10 December 1962, he propounded a new "military line" to the Fifth Plenum of the KWP's Central Committee. Kim's ideas were somewhat original, but the tone was definitely Maoist. Because the Soviet Union had temporarily cut Kim Il-sung adrift, this embrace of some aspects of Chinese thought was not surprising. More to the point, Maoist guerrilla concepts suited what Kim considered to be the "objective circumstances" on the Korean peninsula.

Kim advocated a politically aware "army of cadres" (revolutionary agitators), the arming of his entire populace, completion of nationwide military industrialization, and modernization of his conventional armed forces. Rejecting his army's almost wholly conventional Soviet-style doctrine, the DPRK premier directed an emphasis on irregular warfare drawn from studies of his own operations against the Japanese during World War II. Finally, he began to manipulate key party and military appointments to favor his former guerrilla comrades, the Kapsan faction.⁶



President Park Chung Hee of South
Korea

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Kim ordered immediate agitation-propaganda efforts to throw sand into the gears of ROK progress while he created his new unconventional military machine. He demanded fast action, but even so, he anticipated that it might take until the completion of the current Seven Year Plan (1960—67) for the DPRK to be fully ready for an unconventional campaign.⁷

Events of 1965—66 caused Kim Il-sung to accelerate his timetable. ROK diplomatic and military initiatives served notice that the south no longer felt mortally threatened by its Communist northern neighbor. When President Park signed a treaty with Japan in 1965, the Republic of Korea publicly entered the community of Asian states. This normalized relations between the South Koreans and their former overlords, with Japan finally recognizing an independent ROK. With this recognition came greatly increased Japanese loans, investments, and trade—all fueling the already humming ROK economic engine.

In the wake of this Japanese agreement, President Park moved to consolidate his country's position as an emerging Asian power. In June 1966, he hosted the Asian Pacific Council (Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Vietnam, Thailand, Australia, and Laos) in Seoul. It seemed like a "coming out party" for the ROK. Diplomatic recognition of South Korea doubled during 1966.

A month later, Park's government signed a Status of Forces Agreement with the United States. For the first time, the two countries treated each other as equals at the bargaining table. A United Nations Command (UNC) headquarters team studied ways to reflect this new relationship in the U.S.-dominated military chain of command in Korea.⁸

These diplomatic achievements signaled that Park's improvements were already bearing valuable fruit. The DPRK could not wait until 1967 to act. Fortunately for the North Koreans, the second major development of those years provided what looked like an opening for a serious effort to destabilize the south. In March 1965, the United States deployed ground forces into South Vietnam, thereby joining that forlorn war. By September of that same year, ROK Army units had joined their American allies in Vietnam. Park dispatched some 46,000 ROK soldiers and marines, with the final contingent under way on 15 October 1966.⁹ The Korean forces provided substantial combat power to the allied endeavors in Southeast Asia.

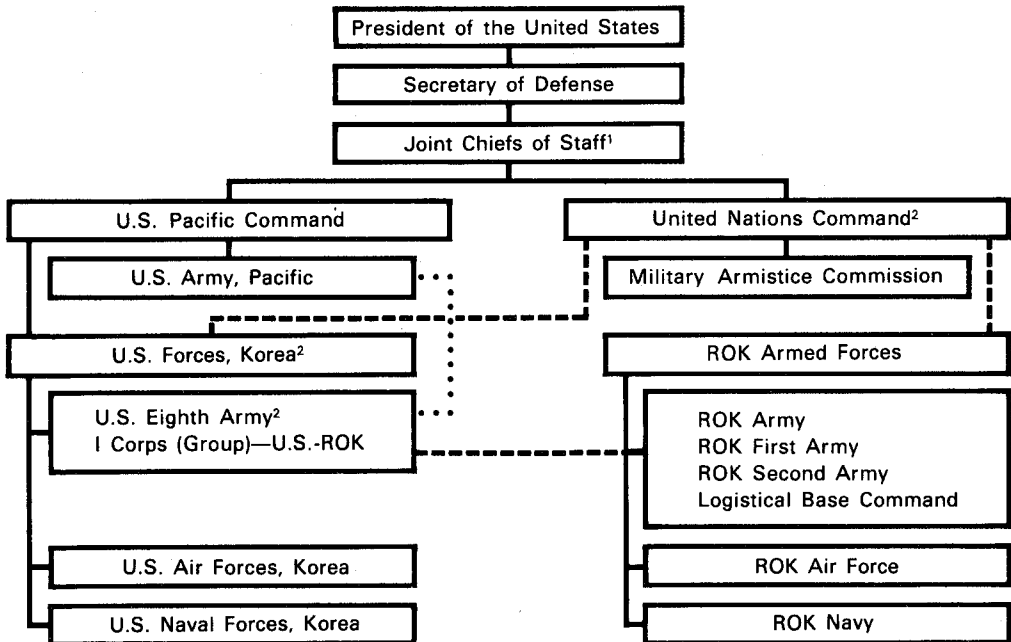
From Kim Il-sung's perspective, however, this situation offered the chance he needed. While he knew that the ROK forces would certainly benefit from combat experience and issues of new American weaponry, he also recognized an important military point: for the first time since 1953, the Republic of Korea had divided its military effort. The fact that the United States had at last turned its sights to another Asian country also might benefit the DPRK.¹⁰ Even as the last few men of the ROK 9th "White Horse" Infantry Division left for Vietnam, Kim Il-sung decided to act. To the south, the Americans and their Korean allies maintained their lonely, boring vigil. The Second Korean Conflict was about to begin.

Organization

To appreciate the American-ROK performance in the fighting of 1966—69, one must begin with an understanding of the overall military organizational structure. "Convoluting" might be the kindest term describing the chain of command in Korea. There were actually two major chains, one for combined U.S.-ROK operations and the other primarily concerned with U.S. joint-service efforts (see figure 1).

The United Nations Command, a combined headquarters, existed as a legacy of the Korean War. In accordance with the July 1950 Security Council decision, the United States acted as the executive power for United Nations military interests in Korea. UNC operated directly under the supervision of the U.S. secretary of defense and the coordination of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Although he did not hold precisely the same status as a unified commander in chief like that of U.S. Pacific Command or U.S. European Command, Commander in Chief, UNC (CINCUNC), enjoyed direct access to the national command authorities through the JCS.

By 1966, the UNC seemed to be a symbolic entity. The U.S. troops in country, an oversized company from Thailand, and a few ceremonial squads comprised the only significant remnants of the multinational UN forces of



Source: Finley, *The US Military Experience in Korea*, 136—37.

LEGEND

- Command
- - - - Operational control during wartime
- Administrative channel (command less operational control)

¹The JCS by statute "assist the secretary" in his direction of U.S. armed forces. Although designated as a channel for communications only, the JCS in fact have often functioned, particularly in the 1960s, as an executive agent for the secretary of defense.

²These positions were held concurrently by the same officer, General Charles H. Bonesteel III.

Figure 1. United Nations Command-U.S. Forces, Korea-U.S. Eighth Army operational chains of command (as of 1 November 1968 but representative of the 1968—69 period)

1950—53, although in theory, the other participants would come back if war broke out again. The principal UN military activity in Korea involved participation in the interminable series of fruitless armistice meetings at Panmunjom.

The UNC mantle, however, gave its holder one important power. Since no formal peace treaty superseded the battlefield truce of 1953, UNC retained operational control over the ROK military, which had been granted by Syngman Rhee back in July 1950.¹¹ Thus, the American general who bore the title of CINCUNC could direct the tactical employment of ROK forces, even in the absence of overt, large-scale hostilities.

This degree of American authority over foreign forces contrasted markedly with the provisions in other theaters under U.S. command. In the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the American serving as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, commanded the vast bulk of his multinational

fighting forces only in wartime—and then only if those units' parent countries chose to participate. In Southeast Asia, the Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, exercised no formal powers over the South Vietnamese armed forces.¹² While U.S. commanders in Europe and Vietnam had access to far more powerful forces than the Commander in Chief, UNC, the American general in Korea actually directed his combined organization.

The joint-service United States Forces, Korea (USFK) plugged into the second major chain of command in the theater. USFK functioned as a subordinate unified command under the U.S. Pacific Command. The USFK headquarters commanded all American land (U.S. Eighth Army), air, and sea forces on the Korean peninsula proper. It exercised no authority over the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the waters around Korea, nor could it command the U.S. Fifth Air Force in the airspaces adjacent to Korea. All was fine as long as conditions in Korea conformed to those envisioned when the UN joined the war in 1950. In that case, UNC commanded USFK and the ROK armed forces.

It took no great imagination to conceive of conditions in Korea that might entail the use of armed forces outside the purview of the United Nations. These included certain routine peacetime exercises, bilateral U.S.-ROK concerns like Vietnam, incidents of interest only to the United States or the ROK, or a new Korean war that did not concern the steadily more radical rank-and-file states of the UN General Assembly. In those all too likely cases, USFK reverted to U.S. Pacific Command control. Yet operations outside the UNC structure forfeited the advantage of U.S. operational control over the ROK military, leaving the allies to hash out these delicate matters, perhaps in the teeth of a crisis or even a full-blown war.

The United States military evolved a clever solution to this potential quandary: giving one man multiple "hats" (posts). The *same* U.S. Army four-star general concurrently held the posts of Commander in Chief, United Nations Command; Commander of U.S. Forces, Korea; and Commanding General, U.S. Eighth Army (EUSA). Regardless of the nature of events in Korea, this ensured that USFK complied with the immediate needs of UNC rather than the distant Pacific Command (PACOM). In his capacity as Commander in Chief, UNC, this general assigned operational control of the ROK Army to the Commanding General, EUSA (himself).¹³

Even with this neat bureaucratic trick, some problems remained. First, the U.S. commander had operational control over his combined and joint U.S. forces (through his UNC and USFK hat). These elements answered to the U.S. general for task organization and tactical missions but *not* for administration, discipline, internal organization, or unit training.¹⁴ The American general could use the capabilities of the forces, but he could only do so much to create new capabilities or modify old ones in his combined and joint units. The exception, of course, was his own outfit, U.S. Eighth Army.

Second, PACOM component headquarters (U.S. Army, Pacific; U.S. Pacific Air Forces; U.S. Pacific Fleet) had authority to bypass UNC and exercise administrative control over their service elements in U.S. Forces, Korea. Such control meant the ability to dictate allocations of trained men and valuable equipment.¹⁵ This became problematic as these headquarters sought to divert maximum resources to the ongoing war in Vietnam.

The U.S. Army four-star general could deal with the steady spate of Army requisitions, thanks to his concurrent UNC-USFK-EUSA roles and consequent direct access to the JCS and the secretary of defense. But the American commander's air and naval subordinates had no such luxury, and USFK could not help them much due to the limits implied by operational control. As a result, with only junior flag officers to shield them, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force contributions in Korea grew more and more hollow as the Vietnam War dragged on.

Finally, along with his three principal hats, the senior U.S. Army general in Korea performed several other important duties. He supervised the extensive U.S. military advisory and assistance program (which fell under the ambassador's control in most other countries). He also provided military expertise to the U.S. ambassador in Seoul. In addition, he presented military opinions and ideas to the president of the ROK and his ministers. These added responsibilities could give a smart U.S. commander important leverage over the U.S. embassy staff and ROK politicians. At times, however, each of the extra roles threatened to turn into full-time jobs and divert attention from the general's three other equally full-time commands.

The U.S. organization in Korea was hardly ideal, but it promised a clever, hard-working commander one absolutely vital attribute: unity of command—if he had the drive and talents to exercise it. Under the usual circumstances, a U.S. general commanding the Korean theater could hope to muddle through, focusing on whatever jobs he did best and leaving the rest to good deputies and chiefs of staff. But the years 1966 through 1969 were not marked by usual circumstances.

Luckily for the U.S.-ROK side, General Charles H. "Tick" Bonesteel III turned out to be a man as unusual as his times demanded. Bonesteel, a fourth-generation West Point graduate (class of 1931) and son of a general, served in World War II as a staff engineer and operations planner at army group and War Department level. In Washington, Bonesteel worked with the rising stars of America's power elite, including an old Oxford University roommate, a wartime colonel named Dean Rusk. By odd coincidence, Bonesteel was one of those who selected the 38th parallel to divide Korea for what was presumed to be temporary postwar occupation by Soviet and American troops.

After 1945, Bonesteel helped administer the economic recovery of post-war Europe, served with the Department of State and the National Security Council, and performed strategic planning as a special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After a brief stint as commanding general of a division and a corps stationed in Germany, he returned to



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General Charles H. Bonesteel III, Commander in Chief, United Nations Command; Commander, U.S. Forces, Korea; Commander, U.S. Eighth Army

Washington as director of special studies for the U.S. Army chief of staff. He also represented the United States on the United Nations Military Staff Committee.¹⁶ Despite these sterling credentials, Bonesteel lacked combat experience.

Perhaps because of his repeated high-level staff tours, he did not display any intuitive sense for inspiring soldiers. Indeed, many who knew him stated that he felt awkward talking to enlisted soldiers and so avoided visiting units in the field. Although tall, gray haired, thin, and sporting a rakish eye patch over his left eye (the result of a detached retina), Bonesteel did little to capitalize on his imposing patrician appearance. Impressing his troops simply was not important to him. "I used to have to drag him off to get a haircut; otherwise he'd just let it grow," an officer on his personal staff recalled.¹⁷ In brief, Bonesteel was no Patton.

Still, his lack of charismatic leadership mattered little, partly because his position did not require such displays, but mainly because his other abilities proved so formidable. Bonesteel possessed a brilliant mind, honed by his education at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and broadened by his unusual assignments.¹⁸ He knew a lot, but more important, he knew how to use his store of data for creative thinking.

Bonesteel displayed five distinct intellectual talents. Any one of these abilities would have marked him as an extraordinary officer. Together, these traits suited him admirably for his demanding role in Korea and marked him as a rarity in the U.S. Army. Of his contemporaries, only a handful of men, such as Andrew J. Goodpaster, Bernard Rogers, George M. Seignious, and Vernon Walters, displayed similar political-military prowess.

First, Bonesteel could process an immense amount of information in a short time. Like Napoleon Bonaparte, Bonesteel showed a flair for juggling his many duties. He had the mental discipline to do several things at once and yet keep them straight in his mind. Without this skill, he would have been unable to use the full range of powers granted to him by his three hats.

Second, from the seemingly discordant mass of incoming information that came to him daily, Bonesteel repeatedly discerned subtle connections. Similar to Frederick the Great, Bonesteel often proved his own best analyst of this influx of intelligence. He refused to be limited by the circumscribed military information delivered by his dutiful intelligence staff. As he put it, he "swung the bolo knife around a bit" and "tried to put intelligence on a more direct basis."¹⁹ Bonesteel requested and received a plethora of raw political, economic, social, and personal details. Working with his typically blinding speed, he drew his own conclusions. He was almost always correct.

Third, Bonesteel demonstrated impressive political acumen. His informed perception gave him an uncanny sense for the delicate political-military balances that constrain the operational level of war. He recognized the difference between the possible and the ideal, and he declined to prejudice the former while pursuing the latter.²⁰ In this, he resembled General Matthew Ridgway, although Bonesteel went well beyond that estimable old soldier with regard to achieving maximum cooperation from the Republic of Korea. Bonesteel was always able to do more with less, so much so that harried superiors occasionally expected him to do everything with nothing.

Fourth, Bonesteel embraced the unorthodox. Probably due to his own atypical professional experience, he did not feel bound by traditional U.S. Army doctrine, practices, or customs. In this, he resembled such self-educated soldiers as Daniel Morgan or Nathan Bedford Forrest. Bonesteel emphasized “good old-fashioned horse sense” instead of doctrinal rules or high technology. “I was anxious to get ideas from anybody,” said Bonesteel, “from a shoe black to a senior officer, or anybody else.”²¹ This attitude allowed Bonesteel to meet unique challenges with unique solutions.

Finally, making hard choices is the hallmark of able generals from Alexander to Douglas MacArthur. In the words of his aide, Bonesteel “knew how to make decisions, and he made them without hesitation.”²² This ability permitted the general to translate his brilliance into positive actions. The Second Korean Conflict required a man willing to use the full range of formal and informal political-military powers available to him. When General Bonesteel took charge of his three commands on 1 September 1966, he had both the authority and the inclination to act as an American proconsul.

Mission

Bonesteel and his U.S.-ROK combined forces had one clear strategic objective: defense of the Republic of Korea (see figure 2). Until late 1966, that implied defense against a repetition of the June 1950 invasion from the north. Since any big invasion would come by land through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), alertness in carrying out armistice duties appeared to offer some chance at early warning. In the meantime, the allies did their part to uphold the UN part of the cease-fire agreement. If U.S.-ROK guards in the DMZ and ROK coastal patrols could scoop up an occasional infiltrator from the north in the process, so much the better.

Unconventional war did not appear to be a special danger. True, both Koreas probed and tested each other, but they generally restricted their

Strategic objective: Defend the Republic of Korea against aggression by the Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea).

Operational objectives:

- Defend against conventional invasion.
- Defend against unconventional operations/insurgencies.
 - Anti-infiltration (DMZ/coast).
 - Counterinsurgency (interior).

Strategic objectives:

- Restrain Republic of Korea actions.
- Conduct operations in an economy-of-force role (do not dilute the U.S. Vietnam War effort).

Sources: United States Army, 2d Infantry Division, “Operational Report—Lessons Learned, Headquarters, 2d Infantry Division, Period Ending 30 April 1969 (U),” UNCLASSIFIED, 1—2; General Charles H. Bonesteel III, United States Army (ret.), interview with Lieutenant Colonel Robert St. Louis, 333—34, Senior Officers Oral History Program Project 73-2, 1973, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA; and Trevor Armbrister, *A Matter of Accountability: The True Story of the Pueblo Affair* (New York: Coward McCann, 1970), 275—77.

Figure 2. United States’ objectives in Korea, 1966—69

actual penetrations to intelligence-gathering efforts. Bonesteel characterized these northern agents as the "cornball military intelligence type, writing down the names of units from signs over the entrance gate and so on." A few firefights had erupted when such spies ran into ROK and U.S. forces. On the whole, however, casualties since the Korean War had been minimal.²³ Had anyone been in the mind to notice, they might have charted a small but important upsurge in violent incidents throughout 1965 and into 1966.

The defense of the ROK against midintensity and low-intensity threats carried one dangerous contradiction. If confronted with unconventional pressures, the U.S.-ROK combined forces would undoubtedly turn to meet the new problems. The allies had to be careful, though, lest their zest for low-intensity conflict undermine their capacities to resist a conventional invasion. By the same token, excessive unwillingness to alter conventional defense postures in order to meet and stop unconventional enemies might allow DPRK agitators to create enough instability to subvert the ROK government. Bonesteel would have to be very discriminating in handling LIC situations. Ultimately, he would have to create the proper combination of defenses, or Korea might collapse into war or anarchy.

America's strategic aim in Korea did not make Bonesteel's task any easier. With its forces fully engaged in Vietnam, the United States wished to prevent a renewal of the Korean War. The ROKs, hoping for eventual reunification, only grudgingly shared this American strategic objective. Senior U.S. officers rarely discussed this issue in public for fear of alienating their ROK counterparts, although the southern leaders certainly knew of the American concern; it pervaded all U.S.-ROK discussions about responses to North Korean provocations.

Bonesteel's responsibility weighed heavily on him. He knew that Americans preferred a quiet Korea—even if the country stayed divided. That might mean restraining the South Koreans, as Bonesteel understood. It also meant restraining himself. He vowed "not to take one damned thing from Vietnam."²⁴ The military term for this was "economy of force." Economy of force necessitates "the measured allocation of available combat power to the primary task as well as secondary tasks."²⁵ The United States had made its allocations of forces, and Korea played second fiddle to Vietnam. Bonesteel intended to keep it that way, even if it cost lives.

That, after all, loomed as the practical human price of an economy-of-force operation. Doctrine writers refer to the acceptance of "risk" in economy-of-force undertakings, implying the perils of casualties and possibly even defeat in the secondary arena. Bonesteel's men might have to suffer losses due to the lack of reinforcement simply to free up resources for the big war in Southeast Asia. At the operational level, economy of force risked reverses in the secondary theater. At the soldier level, it meant that young men risked death for no immediate, tangible gain. The cerebral Bonesteel needed to invent a way to defuse this potential morale problem, both for his own restive draftees and the aggressive ROKs.

The two missions in Korea did not necessarily work against each other as long as North Korea restrained itself. But that depended on Kim Il-sung's intentions; his capabilities to make trouble were not in doubt.

Enemy

In evaluating the DPRK armed forces, one must be careful to distinguish between conventional and unconventional components. Prior to the final months of 1966, most U.S.-ROK collection and analysis focused upon the line units of the North Korean military. Kim Il-sung's new LIC forces had yet to show themselves in a major way.

The DPRK conventional order of battle certainly demanded concern. The north disposed a strong army, a surprisingly good air force, a small navy, and an improving militia at the village level. The north's sluggish socialist economy had not performed well since about 1960, but Kim Il-sung supplemented native industry by taking care to gain military aid from at least one and usually both Communist giants. Thanks to the ouster of Khrushchev in late 1964, the USSR had chosen to renew arms shipments in May 1965. Kim Il-sung gladly incorporated the new Soviet hardware into his military.²⁶

Of the four branches of the DPRK armed forces, the Korean People's Army (KPA) posed the most noteworthy conventional threat (see table 1). It deployed eight infantry divisions along the DMZ, backed by eight more infantry divisions, three motorized infantry divisions, a tank division, a collection of separate infantry and tank brigades and regiments, and about ten skeleton-strength reserve divisions. Altogether, and assuming mobilization, the KPA could place about thirty-four division equivalents in the field.

Reports of the time credited the tough KPA conscripts as being "well-equipped and highly dedicated." KPA officers, many veterans of the 1950-53 fighting, knew their jobs. Kim Il-sung trusted his army so much that, unlike the Soviet or Chinese forces, his KPA had no true political officers. Commanders led without fear of ideological oversight. This allowed them a degree of initiative not often seen in Communist armies. Schooled on a mixture of Soviet, Chinese, and home-grown doctrine, the KPA practiced regularly for an attack to the south. American analysts warned that KPA "organization and emphasis on mechanized strength [gave] it a capability of rapidly moving into a strong offensive role."²⁷

The Korean People's Air Force (KPAF) also worried U.S. and ROK planners. The KPAF's inventory of jet aircraft included some 60 Il-28 light bombers and about 450 MiG-15 and MiG-17 fighter-bombers, all suited for ground attack. The Soviet-trained pilots seemed bellicose and competent: two interceptors damaged a USAF RB-47 reconnaissance jet in mid-1965. Briefed on this air armada, General Bonesteel pronounced it "formidable." He feared that a massive KPAF preemptive strike could destroy the smaller ROK air arm on the ground before U.S. air reinforcements arrived to even the balance.²⁸

TABLE 1
Balance of Conventional Military Power in Korea, November 1966

	DPRK	UNC	(U.S. portion)
ARMED FORCES PERSONNEL	386,000	675,000	(55,000)
Army			
Soldiers	345,000	600,000	(50,000) ¹
Special Operations Forces	3,000	1,000	
Border Guards	26,000	39,000	
Militia	1,200,000	none ²	
Regular divisions	24	22	(2)
Reserve divisions	10 ³	10	
Tanks	800	656	(216)
Other armored vehicles	900	1,381	(781)
Artillery	5,200	2,160	(224)
Air Force			
Airmen	30,000	28,000	(5,000)
Combat airplanes	590	265	(60)
Helicopters	20	65	(58)
Navy			
Sailors	9,000	17,450	(450)
Marines	2,000	30,050	(50)
Destroyers/frigates	0	7	
Submarines	4	0	
Minor combatants	79	30	
Landing craft	20	23	
Auxiliaries	34	12	

¹About 46,000 ROK troops (2 Army divisions, 1 Marine brigade) were deployed to Vietnam at this time. They have been included in this table, although they were not immediately available.

²The ROK Homeland Defense Reserve Force, totaling over 2 million people, was not formally organized until 13 April 1968.

³At this time, little public information had been released concerning DPRK reserve divisions. Some U.S. sources later estimated that the DPRK disposed from 10 to 17 low-strength mobilization divisions (roughly equivalent of ROK reserve units).

Sources: Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1968-69* (London: Adlard and Son, 1968), 13, 38-39; Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., *North Korean Special Forces* (Surrey, England: Jane's Publishing Co., 1988), 101, 161; Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Washington, DC: U.S. News Books, 1981), 272-73; General Charles H. Bonesteel III, United States Army (ret.), "U.S.-South Korean Partnership Holds a Truculent North at Bay," *Army* 19 (October 1969): 61; and James P. Finley, *The US Military Experience in Korea, 1971-1982: In the Vanguard of ROK-US Relations* (San Francisco, CA: Command Historian's Office, Secretary Joint Staff, HQ., USFK/EUSA, 1983), 19-21.

Analysis assessed the little Korean People's Navy (KPN) as "primarily a coastal defense force." Its four Soviet-made W-class submarines, four Soviet-supplied Komar-class missile boats, and cluster of motor torpedo boats might hamper U.S.-ROK sea lines of communication in the Sea of Japan.²⁹ Most allied planners readily discounted this small naval force.

The Workers' and Peasants' Red Guard Militia, organized in response to Kim Il-sung's December 1962 call for arming the populace, provided a pervasive government presence throughout North Korea. This vast force of discharged conscripts, local auxiliaries, informers, party activists, and observers supported the regular army components by guaranteeing rear-area security and trained replacements.³⁰ The ubiquitous militia made U.S.-ROK infiltrations of the north extremely hazardous, thereby hampering human intelligence gathering. In concert with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the militia also ensured loyalty in the Communist state.

Powerful as the North Korean forces appeared, when placed in the full context of the conventional balance on the peninsula, the Communists did not possess a militarily significant advantage in combat power. If Kim Il-sung chose to reunify his country by force, he confronted two important problems. First, even with increased Soviet and Chinese material aid, the DPRK could not sustain a long war against its more populous and prosperous neighbor. If the two Koreas fought, the DPRK had to try for a quick knockout. A war of attrition favored the richer south. Second, the DPRK could not count on intervention from China or the USSR to offset the almost assured American role in any major renewal of the fighting. The north had to assume that the United States would reinforce its forward-deployed units, first with air power, then sea power, and finally with land power. Again, this argued for a lightning strike, winning before the U.S. reinforcements arrived.

Given the standing conventional balance in 1966, however, Kim Il-sung's generals could not reasonably expect to succeed in a risky blitzkrieg. The sides were too evenly matched.³¹ Something had to be done to undermine ROK strengths in favor of the DPRK. Kim's new "military line" promised a solution to the problem. In the words of a later American report, "the ultimate aim of these operations is to create as much trouble as possible in South Korea, including difficulties in our relationships with the South Koreans. When these 'preparation of the battle area' efforts have achieved sufficient success, then the regular forces may be used as required in order to complete the communization of the Korean peninsula."³² Put simply, a well-orchestrated northern LIC effort might spark the insurgency necessary to divert U.S.-ROK forces and give the edge to Kim Il-sung's conventional military units.

The North Korean premier chaired the National Intelligence Committee that directed and approved all intelligence and proinsurgency activities. Its subordinate Cabinet Intelligence Committee coordinated, collated, and analyzed information gathered by the field agencies. The actual DPRK field units amounted to fewer than 3,000 men (and selected women agents). Their low numbers could be deceptive, however, since each skilled operator-agitator had the potential to choose, train, and supervise up to a hundred informants and guerrilla recruits. In this aspect, they resembled U.S. Special Forces (Green Berets).

The KWP Liaison Department controlled tactical employment of intelligence and unconventional efforts (see figure 3). Its own Military Section

Conventional forces emplaced just north of the DMZ (west to east)

Elements, II Corps

Elements, 6th Infantry Division

Elements, 8th Infantry Division

Elements, VII Corps

Elements, 15th Infantry Division

Elements, 45th Infantry Division

Conventional/unconventional forces in the DMZ (west to east)

Two companies, 6th Infantry Division DMZ Police

Two companies, 8th Infantry Division DMZ Police

Two companies, 15th Infantry Division DMZ Police

Two companies, 45th Infantry Division DMZ Police

Unconventional infiltration forces

Liaison Department, Korean Workers' party

Military Section

Guerrilla Guidance Section

General Political Bureau of the KPA

Propaganda and Instigation Bureau

Enemy Affairs Guidance Bureau

Security Bureau

Reconnaissance Bureau, KPA¹

124th Army Unit (at least 9 operational detachments)

283d Army Unit

17th Foot Reconnaissance Brigade

¹The Reconnaissance Bureau had assumed the lead role in unconventional warfare by late 1966, although it remained formally under the supervision of the Liaison Bureau.

Sources: Bermudez, *North Korean Special Forces*, 8, 26—34, 63, 157; and Bonesteel interview, 329—30.

Figure 3. Korean People's Army and associated forces along the U.S.-held segment of the DMZ, 1 January 1968

conducted surveillance and staged incidents designed to subvert the South Korean military and police. The Guerrilla Guidance Section assisted and fomented insurgency in the ROK.

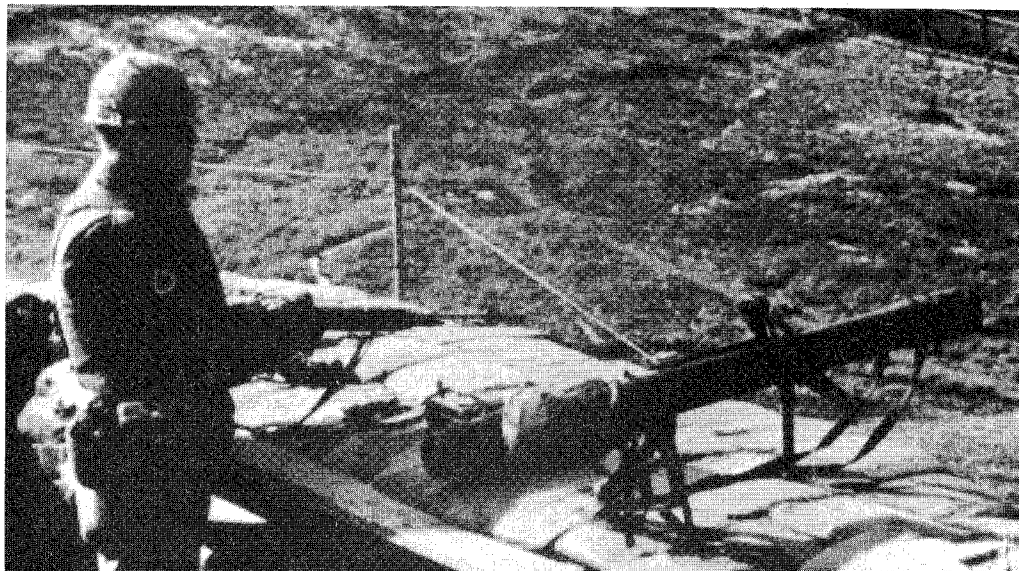
In addition to these organic sections, the KWP Liaison Department supervised infiltrators from the KPA General Political Bureau. This outfit ran the Propaganda and Instigation Bureau and the Enemy Affairs Guidance Bureau. The former bureau attempted to cause individual defections and unit dissatisfaction in the ROK military. The latter focused on psychological warfare to undermine the morale of both the ROKs and the Americans.

The KWP Liaison Department also coordinated those Ministry of Internal Affairs investigations that required hot pursuit or preemptive raids south of the DMZ. Although rare, these Security Bureau missions made it very hard for U.S. and ROK agents to find their way north or return.

The final subordinate bureau under the KWP Liaison Department was the Reconnaissance Bureau of the Ministry of Defense. This element provided the main striking arm for Kim Il-sung's unconventional warfare effort. It operated four Foot Reconnaissance Stations, one in support of each KPA corps on the DMZ. Each station controlled a small foot reconnaissance brigade responsible for collection of military intelligence along the DMZ. These brigades often escorted and covered infiltrators from other DPRK agencies.³³

The Reconnaissance Bureau also controlled the 23d Amphibious Brigade, which employed specially made infiltration boats to work the ROK coastlines. Camouflaged to look and sound like run-down fishing boats, these carefully engineered craft contained hidden diesel engines capable of bursts of incredible speeds (0—40 knots in three minutes). Moreover, their cleverly rounded wooden hulls defied radar acquisition. It took bold sailors to bring these craft inshore. Although the KPN might not have made much of a fight against the U.S. Seventh Fleet, its array of small-boat skills enabled it to deliver sea raiders under the most adverse conditions.

At this time, the North Koreans did not employ airborne insertions. The reasons for ignoring this potentially useful method included a lingering respect for the wartime UN air supremacy, concern over the excellent U.S.-ROK early-warning net, a shortage of trained pilots and specialized transport aircraft, and the lack of any indigenous experience in parachute and airlanding operations. The KPAF had concentrated on air defense and ground attack, not special operations. As long as the DMZ and coasts remained relatively accessible, the DPRK neglected aerial infiltration means.³⁴



Army

A recoilless rifle position along the DMZ

In addition to its own units, the Reconnaissance Bureau had authority to draw on conventional KPA, KPAF, and KPN units for support of its missions. In the DMZ, for example, frontline KPA divisions assisted infiltrations and covered withdrawals, often with supporting fires. North Korean divisions made especially good use of their DMZ Police Companies (troops routinely stationed in the northern half of the zone in accordance with the 1953 Armistice Agreement). DMZ Police supplied the latest situation updates and provided guides as necessary.³⁵

North Korean infiltrators depended upon stealth to breach the DMZ or the ROK seacoasts. Superbly trained, repeatedly rehearsed, and thoroughly indoctrinated, these special fighters displayed remarkable knowledge of demolitions, land navigation, and small-unit tactics. Most doubled as political agitators, ever ready to reeducate interested locals and spread Kim Il-sung's gospel to what were thought to be willing southern ears.

These men drilled at evasion. Their mission lay in the ROK rear, where they usually moved in small teams of two to twelve men. Because each member normally carried little beyond his Soviet PPSH submachine gun and some demolitions, the KPA teams lacked the firepower to slug it out with conventional units. They preferred flight to battle.

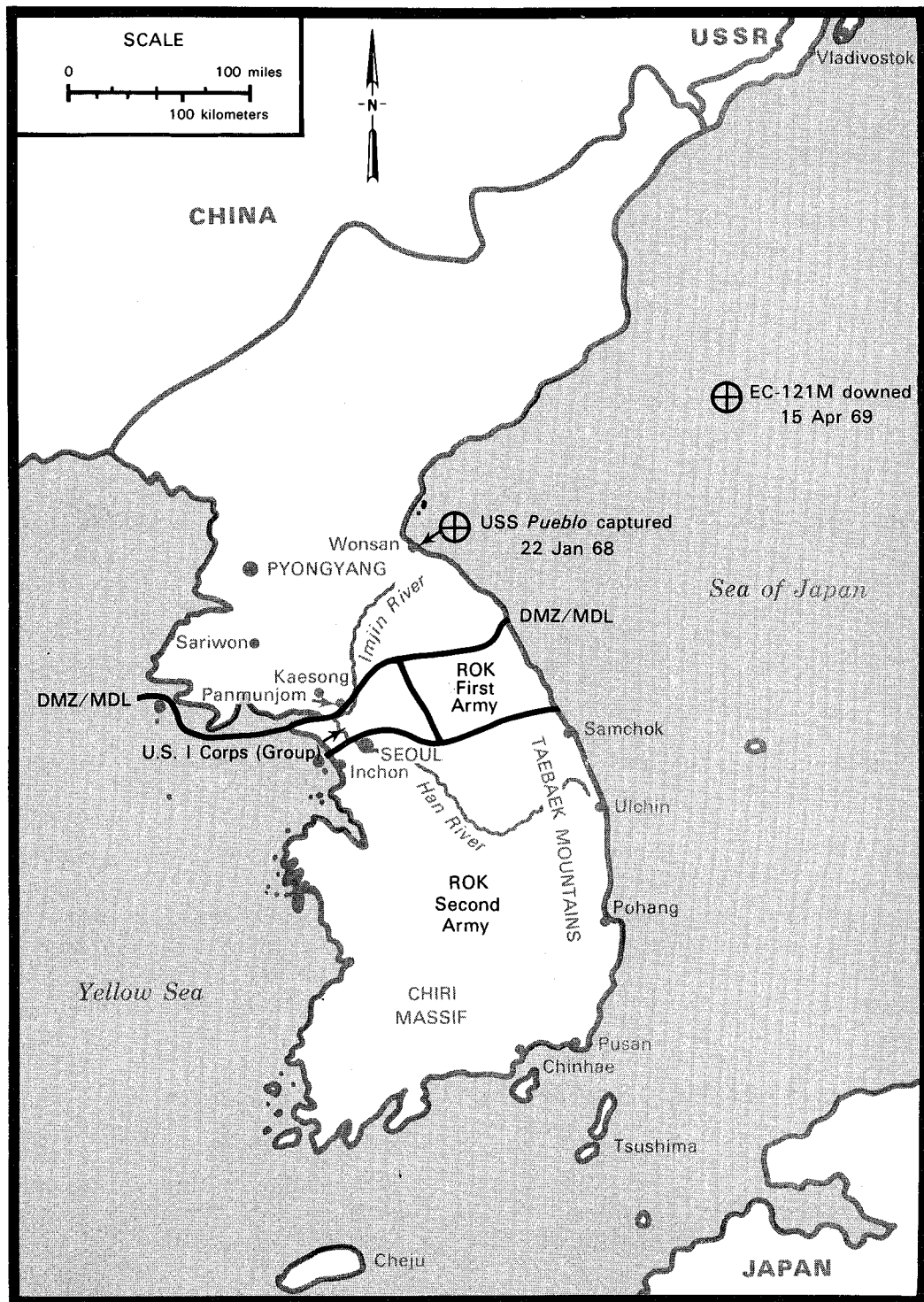
When in contact, however, they fought with cunning and aggressiveness. The infiltrators proved adept at arranging violent, immediate ambushes, breaking contact, or waiting patiently for pursuers to pass by—whichever technique best suited their tactical situation. If trapped, these North Koreans rarely surrendered, preferring suicide by hand grenade.³⁶ Man for man, the DPRK special forces soldiers of 1966–69 might have been the toughest opponents ever to face American soldiers.

Additional special operations units still on the drawing boards would soon arrive to augment Kim Il-sung's able clandestine warriors. Even without them, however, the northern Communists had created a potent instrument for guerrilla combat. American and ROK ignorance of these deadly new enemies only made their impact that much more effective.

Terrain

The topography of the Republic of Korea has been described as a petrified "sea in a heavy gale" (see map 1). Hills and ridges proliferate, with the exception of some rolling lowlands near Seoul, the capital and largest city. The long, rugged chain of the Taebaek Mountains defines most of eastern Korea; its affiliated Chiri Massif greatly restricts movement in the southern portion of the ROK. Much of the forest that once covered Korea has disappeared, leaving underbrush and saplings behind to inhibit mobility. Two rivers, the Imjin along the DMZ and the Han near Seoul, lie athwart movement corridors from north to south.

Weather also affected mobility in Korea in the 1960s. The peninsula's temperate climate resembled that of New York state. Glutinous mud hampered vehicle operations during the early spring thaw and the heavy rains



Map 1. Korea, 1966—69

of late summer; frequent storms also made air sorties questionable in these months. In these wet periods, even tracked vehicles could be road bound. The dry periods of late spring (May—June) and midwinter (January—February) offered the best conditions for massed motorized movement. As long as the snows did not get too deep, the cold weather actually could be preferable due to good trafficability on frozen lower slopes and the drainage of rice paddies on the valley floors.

Dismounted elements could move year-round. North Korean agents favored the dry ground, longer nights, and fogs of early autumn—before the snows came. Unlike in the spring, the summer vegetation was still present to shield their movements. September, October, and the first two weeks of November became prime infiltration times.

Without vehicles for heat and shelter, troops on foot—even special forces—usually avoided movement in the bitterly cold Korean winters. This resulted in an unconventional warfare “campaign season” from March to November, although there were exceptions.

Unless able to use the seas that surround the Korean peninsula, a conventional invader enjoys little choice but to grind south from hill mass to hill mass, slowed by late summer mud and deep winter snow. Admittedly, Seoul lies within a few dozen kilometers of North Korea, but it could take months to get that far against any sort of determined soldiery—as both sides found out during the static war of 1951—53. Korea favors the prepared defender. The United States and the ROK had been preparing since 1953.³⁷

Though fine for conventional defense, this same ROK terrain and weather aided covert infiltrators. Even with a lot of good infantry, it was not physically possible to block every twisting gully and overgrown hillside, especially on dark nights during blinding thunderstorms or screaming blizzards. In a midintensity war, a few “leakers” (infiltrators) mattered little. In counter guerrilla work, however, stopping skilled agents would prove a monumental challenge.

Conventional or not, most North Korean land forces heading south had to cross the Demilitarized Zone. This man-made boundary reflected the battle lines on 27 July 1953 rather than any natural barrier. The DMZ extended across the entire 242 kilometers (151 miles) of the peninsula. By agreement, the zone extended two kilometers north and south of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), the precise armistice trace.

Each side had authority in their half of the DMZ, and each stood guard with care, alert for signs of another conventional war. The U.S. 2d Infantry Division defended 29.8 kilometers (18.5 miles) of the DMZ directly in front of Seoul. The ROKs handled the rest. The Panmunjom Military Armistice Commission site, located in the neutral Joint Security Area, lay opposite the western part of the American sector, smack in the center of the DMZ proper (see map 2).

Terrain along the DMZ amounted to a microcosm of the ROK. In the American sector, for example, the maze of hills averaged 500 feet in height.



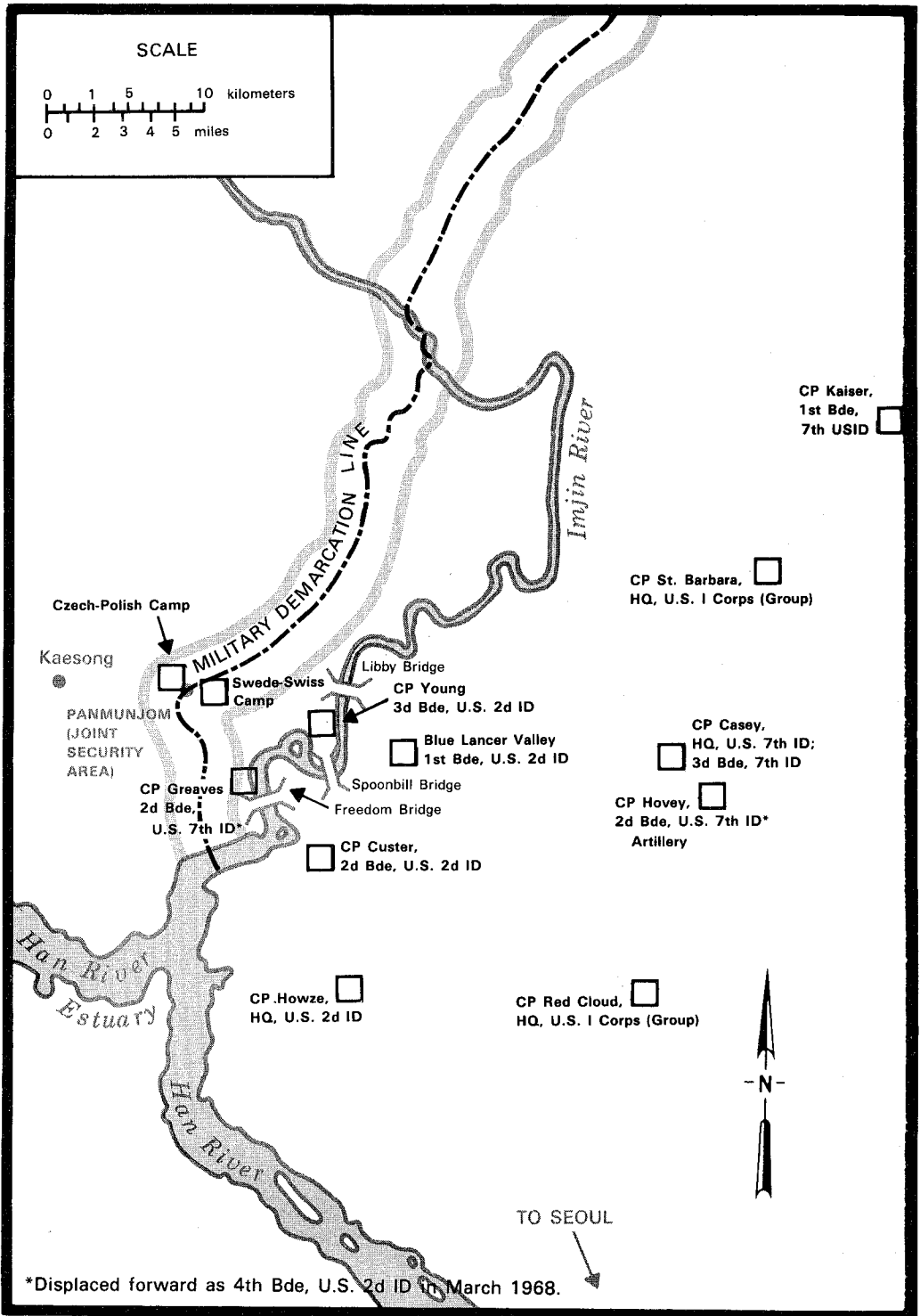
Military Review

U.S. and South Korean soldiers guarding a sector of the DMZ under harsh circumstances, 26 August 1967

Two major corridors, the Munsan (western) and Chorwon, converged on Seoul. The Imjin River flowed roughly parallel to the DMZ, just behind the forward U.S. positions. Underbrush, tall grass, and thickets choked the lower slopes of the endless succession of ridgelines.³⁸

Aside from the rough natural surroundings, both sides had undertaken improvements in the neutral buffer area. These refinements facilitated early warning of any major attack. A string of observation posts, authorized by the truce, dotted each portion of the DMZ itself. Patrols were also permitted on either side of the MDL. The north prepared minefields and fighting positions just north of the DMZ; to a lesser degree, the U.S.-ROK troops also readied defensive lines just south of their side of the zone.

The armistice allowed no crew-served weapons, armored vehicles, artillery, or fortifications in the zone. Each side could send only 1,000 men into the DMZ at any one time. Once there, these temporarily designated "DMZ police" could patrol as necessary "for the conduct of civil administration and relief" on their side of the MDL. Both sides agreed to refrain from firing weapons across the MDL, overflights of the DMZ, and infiltrations of any type. Joint Observer Teams (UN and Chinese-DPRK) and Neutral



Map 2. The DMZ, U.S. sector, 1966-69

Nations Teams (Swedish, Swiss, Czechs, and Poles) based at Panmunjom supposedly enforced these provisions.

As a practical matter, the North Koreans flouted most of the rules. They fortified their DMZ outposts; introduced machine guns, mortars, and recoilless rifles; and created a special force of permanent DMZ Police well in excess of the numbers allowed. Moreover, they shot at any UN soldier on or near the MDL, including those placing markers in accordance with the armistice.³⁹ In contrast, United Nations troops generally followed the regulations.

The DMZ constituted the most militarily significant obstacle to land forces moving from north to south. But neither side could cross the DMZ in force without triggering well-prepared defensive schemes. Thanks to their illicit work, the northerners made any movement from south to north incredibly risky. What is more, the KPA could count on secure, well-protected bases of operations for their thrusts south against the more law-abiding UN forces. In time, the allies would emulate their adversaries and become more interested in true counterinfiltration rather than just mere early warning of large-scale attack. But that was not the case in 1966.

Aside from their ground approach, northern forces also could use the seas in attempts to outflank the DMZ. Because the small KPN might carry only a few battalions at most, the threat of a DPRK D day did not exist. Incremental sea infiltration, though, turned out to be another matter. South Korea had to protect almost 6,800 kilometers of irregular, island-strewn seacoast. The narrow coastal plains (five kilometers wide to the east, up to twenty to the west) included most of the important cities, roads, and military facilities—all well within striking distance for seaborne raiders. Conversely, much of the shoreline fronted on remote, sparsely populated wilderness.⁴⁰ For agitators determined to reach large segments of the population, establish hidden caches, or create spectacular terrorist incidents, the ROK coastline offered many opportunities.

Along with the topography, the human facets of the South Korean environment deserve a few remarks. Civilian loyalties might determine the fate of the country, particularly if properly manipulated by DPRK guerrilla organizers. Ethnicity, rural sentiments, and the existence of a form of ROK nationalism all bore consideration by both sides.

The Korean population has been described as “one of the most homogeneous in the world.”⁴¹ This meant that distinctions between North and South Koreans were largely artificial and that northerners could appeal to a common heritage. On the other hand, most southerners distrusted their North Korean cousins. Traditional regional prejudices—long predating the war—stereotyped northerners as rude and belligerent. The bulk of South Koreans in 1966 vividly remembered the grim events of 1950. Northern aggression only buttressed the old folk beliefs. It hardly helped that Kim Il-sung had called in the hated Chinese and Russians on his behalf.

Besides exploiting ethnic links, North Korea hoped to develop support from rural southerners. Kim Il-sung and his men rightly noted that the



National Archives

Workmen establishing lights at the chain-link fence along the DMZ

growth of capitalist industries in the south created social instability—as evidenced by the urban confusion of 1960–61. But Park’s coup and subsequent elevation to civil power—in defiance of the Seoul intellectuals and students—convinced the DPRK leadership that agitation among the disgruntled city classes guaranteed little. The majority of South Koreans still lived in farming villages in 1966. As long as the countryside believed in the government and sent its sons into the ROK Army and police, urban insurgents stood little chance of victory.

Could the farmers be subverted? Isolated from the new wealth of the cities, less educated, locally focused, and steeped in superstitious, traditional ways, the Korean farmers looked like a ripe target. They nicely matched the recommended audience for the Maoist ideas in vogue in Kim Il-sung’s new military line—or so it seemed.

One crucial difference deserved notice. Since President Rhee’s land reform of 1949–50, private farm ownership had become the norm rather than exception; less than 10 percent of the ROK’s rural people still worked as tenant laborers by 1966.⁴² While not exactly New England yeoman farmers, these Koreans were not penniless peasants. They retained all of the conservatism typical to the countryside, yet in a very real sense, they now owned a piece of the ROK.

Along with southern prejudices and rural attitudes, a degree of discernible ROK nationalism had also arisen. The treaty with Japan, membership in the Asian Pacific Council, rising economic power, and especially the dispatch of ROK forces to aid the mighty United States—all made South Koreans conscious of their country's increasing influence.

North Koreans decried these developments as evidence that the ROK authorities had sold out unification for capitalist treasures. Sometimes it appeared that the ROK had given up Rhee's old goal of bringing the two Koreas together. Yet as President Park put it, ROK economic growth not only brought recognition worldwide, it also provided "a current for national unification," a nebulous phrase that suggested the DPRK could be conquered by southern economic dominance alone.⁴³ This image of peaceful triumph contrasted sharply with the usual public view of the warlike, crafty northerners.

In sum, the social and economic conditions militated against conventional midintensity conflict. Moreover, the DPRK would need to launch a quick war over ground and under weather that aided the defense, a defense very likely fully alerted by its DMZ trip-wire units. Without a navy, North Korea could only barge south in force and hope for the best. That is, unless it went the low-intensity route.

South Korea offered a guerrilla agitator plenty of access, whether across the overgrown DMZ or along the lengthy, barren coasts. The population in the cities had already shown cracks in its cohesion during Rhee's collapse, and the rural majority might be ripe for propaganda and organization. Environmental factors favored the lone guerrilla, the small special-warfare boat, and the trained terrorist team. The fact that U.S. and ROK troops were not ready for such a campaign only made the terrain benefits that much more useful to northern infiltrators.

Troops Available

American and South Korean forces on hand in late 1966 formed a strong conventional force. Backed up by the U.S. Fifth Air Force in Japan and Okinawa and the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the western Pacific, these troops deterred overt attacks by North Korea. U.S. capabilities against covert threats existed, but they had yet to be organized into a coherent framework. The UNC land forces positioned one U.S. and nine ROK divisions along the DMZ, backed by another U.S. division and nine more ROK divisions, plus a few separate brigades. Upon mobilization, the ROK Army would be filled out with four ready reserve divisions and six less well-equipped rear-area security divisions.⁴⁴

Provisions for UNC operational control and the ongoing U.S. advisory and assistance program ensured solid cooperation between the allied armies. American headquarters often directed ROK Army units. The I Corps (Group), for example, commanded a mixed force of ROK and U.S. divisions. Now and then, small U.S. forces, typically helicopter or signal units, served under ROK supervision.

Although the most powerful formations on the peninsula, both U.S. Army divisions in Korea suffered from quantitative and qualitative deficiencies (see table 2). Vietnam had priority: Korea would have to fend for itself. U.S. units in Europe drew down too, but they did not fight anyone during this time. U.S. Eighth Army soldiers did, and they started with what they had.

Both American divisions lacked the usual complement of infantry battalions; the U.S. 7th Infantry Division had only one tank battalion instead of the usual two. A pair of mechanized infantry battalions beefed up each division's firepower, partially atoning for the absent battalions. With their reduced establishments, both divisions hobbled along chronically under-strength.⁴⁵

Though they had most of their weapons, each division sorely missed the normal complement of helicopters. General Bonesteel recalled: "When I got there on 1 September 1966, there were only four or five Hueys. That was the total number of Hueys in South Korea."⁴⁶ Hunting infiltrators in the rough Korean terrain necessitated a lot of trained light infantry or a lot of helicopters to move the infantry on hand; Bonesteel's divisions had neither.

TABLE 2
Strength of U.S. Divisions in Korea, 1 January 1968

	U.S. 2d Infantry Division		U.S. 7th Infantry Division	
	TOE*	MTOE**	TOE	MTOE
Aggregates				
Personnel	16,810	15,057	16,810	11,300
Helicopters ¹	88	20	88	20
Tanks	135	135	135	81
Battalions²				
Infantry	8	5	8	5
Infantry (Mechanized)	0	2	0	2
Tank	2	2	2	1
Cavalry	1	1	1	1
TOTAL	11	10	11	9

*TOE: Table of organization and equipment, a model unit.

**MTOE: Modified table of organization and equipment, theater alterations to ideal unit organizations.

¹In Korea, divisions substituted elderly, underpowered OH-23 Raven helicopters for modern OH-6A Cayuse and UH-1D Iroquois (Huey) types.

²Infantry battalions in Vietnam habitually formed a fourth rifle company; those in Korea retained the traditional three companies.

Sources: United States, Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Combat Readiness of United States and South Korean Forces in South Korea*, 90th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, DC, 7 June 1968), 4-5; United States Department of the Army, Table of Organization and Equipment no. 7 G, *Infantry Division* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 31 March 1966), 2, 10, 17, 64, 66, 72; Robert A. Doughty, *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76*, Leavenworth Papers no. 1 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1979), 21; and Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle*, 47-54, 340-41.

Trimmed numbers did not help, but the uneven quality of U.S. units hurt even more. Firepower might mask these flaws in a big war, but they showed up only too well in small-unit clashes with the skilled North Korean special operators. Old weapons, thirteen-month tours, some poor soldiers, and weak leadership also hampered unit performance. The last problem exacerbated the first three.

Weapons were not first-rate. U.S. troops in Korea did not have the new M-16 automatic rifles, M-48A3 diesel-engine tanks, or UH-1 turbine-powered helicopters. They got by with heavy M-14 semiautomatic rifles and tired M-48A2C gasoline-engine tanks.

They tried to get by with their old, small helicopters, but that did not work. Aside from a handful of UH-1B and UH-1D Hueys, the Americans relied on underpowered, bubble-topped OH-23 Ravens—each able to carry only a pilot and one passenger.⁴⁷ Bonesteel pooled the few available Hueys at I Corps (Group), the headquarters that controlled both divisions.

Like their fellow Americans in Vietnam, most U.S. soldiers in Korea served a short tour. With few exceptions, they came and went as individuals, not units. Soldiers remained in country thirteen months (a month longer than Army troops in Vietnam). Bonesteel could and did extend key and essential men up to two more months. A few officers stayed even longer, typically to fill crucial command and staff slots.

The individual rotation policy affected American abilities to function in the demanding Korean environment. On the positive side, every unit had veterans. On the negative side, many American companies seemed like collections of strangers rather than well-honed teams. Each arrival and departure tended to reshuffle everyone to keep key roles covered. Rifle squads rarely maintained the same roster for two weeks in a row. Thus, American units in Korea remained in a state of constant flux, even when not taking casualties.

Troop quality could have been better. Korea received more than its share of the sad "Project 100,000" soldiers—disadvantaged young men inducted into the U.S. Army as sort of an "armed Job Corps." Uneducated, unruly, and unhappy, these people gravitated toward the military equivalent of unskilled labor—the infantry.⁴⁸ They demanded extra training time and created numerous disciplinary headaches. Some performed well. Many did not.

Along with a "Project 100,000" soldier, most rifle squads also had a KATUSA (Korean Augmentation to U.S. Army) soldier. This system remained as a holdover from a 1950 program designed to flesh out understrength U.S. units, provide a quick infusion of "local knowledge," and train South Koreans in U.S. techniques.⁴⁹ While potentially very useful in counter-insurgency work, KATUSAs presented their U.S. chain of command with a soldier typically weak in his command of English and understanding of modern mechanical technology. Again, the consequent inefficiencies resulted in the loss of valuable tactical training time.

Weak leadership made everything worse. Short tours and the priority on Vietnam meant that veteran officers and sergeants simply were not there. Those that were assigned often represented a conglomerate of inexperience and sloth that might be charitably called “the second string.” One brigade commander lamented that “junior leaders lacked the basic skills to take full charge of their men and lead them effectively and aggressively.”⁵⁰ Why?

Vietnam exerted a powerful influence on professional Army leaders. The centrifugal effects of mounting casualties and brief tours pulled officers and NCOs into Vietnam like water sucked toward a drain. It was not all by force. Many leaders volunteered for Southeast Asia. Good men wanted to be there, not in the perceived Korean backwater. Nobody expected to be part of an “economy of force” mission save the lazy, who were not wanted anyway. As one general commented, “I’ve known of officers who have chosen retirement rather than come here because they thought it was a dead end.”⁵¹

At the officer level, Bonesteel and his commanders made do with what they had. Often, this meant that senior leaders stretched themselves very thin by closely supervising poor officers or very junior officers. Raw second lieutenants led platoons for a few months, then succeeded to company command. With lieutenant colonels in short supply, majors often commanded battalions for up to a year. Even the U.S. Eighth Army staff seemed full



Soldiers from the U.S. 2d Infantry Division prepare to move out along the DMZ. One soldier (fourth from left) is a KATUSA.

of young lieutenants routinely coming and going rather than the school-trained majors and lieutenant colonels normally authorized.⁵²

Sergeants, the backbone of the U.S. Army, were at a real premium. But daily work had to be done, and somebody had to try to take charge. To build up some noncommissioned leadership, the U.S. units resorted to divisional schools. After a few weeks of tactical instruction, the students received their stripes.⁵³ Such schools produced graduates, but only time could make them real sergeants. This put even more burden on the under-strength, overworked American officer corps.

Though weaker in firepower than the two U.S. divisions, the ROK Army fielded full-strength units. For the ROKs, Vietnam was clearly a secondary task. Defending South Korea stayed the top priority—and very nearly the only priority in times of crisis.

The ROKs did have problems. By and large, they carried weapons two generations behind the new models used in Southeast Asia. For example, they still used semiautomatic Garand M1 rifles—good but dated against a KPA foe armed with automatic AK-47s.⁵⁴ The ROKs possessed only a few helicopters.

While the ROKs might have preferred better weapons, few could criticize the quantity and quality of the Korean rank and file. Draftees ordinarily served all thirty-three months of active duty in the same company, allowing almost three times the stability of the U.S. system. American observers rated the ROK line soldiers as “well trained” and praised the “high esprit” in their outfits.⁵⁵

ROK Army officers normally remained in duty positions longer than their American counterparts, although this varied depending upon the individual. ROK Army commanders down to corps level, and occasionally below, benefited from a well-established system of American assistance—the famous Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG), created in 1949. Beginning in 1964, in a major change of previous policy dating back to the Korean War, the American advisers began to turn over routine training and planning to the ROKs. Bonesteel summarized: “the advisers were no longer telling them when to blow their noses.” Not surprisingly, cautious ROK officers did not exactly jump at their new-found freedom—at least at first. They got better, but they were definitely still in transition when their northern foes struck in 1966.

Regardless of KMAG’s work, ROK Army leadership certainly had its own way of doing business. While competent and well versed in U.S. Army doctrine, South Korean officers tended to treat American field manuals as prescriptive orders rather than descriptive conceptual approaches. When stumped, they waited for guidance. This did not always come, as Korean officers tended to suppress embarrassing news rather than risk offending their American superiors and advisers. If things went according to plan, the ROK Army excelled. If not, “they didn’t know how to operate,” as Bonesteel bluntly concluded.⁵⁶

In the air, Bonesteel could count on the American 314th Air Division of a few dozen warplanes and a small but solid ROK Air Force. The U.S. fighter-bombers ensured a nuclear capacity if that became necessary. In addition, the U.S. Fifth Air Force in Japan promised ready reinforcement, but Bonesteel always considered a surprise air attack from the north to be his greatest nightmare.⁵⁷ Like the U.S. Army, the U.S. Air Force diverted most of its effort to Vietnam. Thus, the U.S. 314th Air Division and the Fifth Air Force in South Korea often were undermanned.

At sea, Bonesteel had almost no U.S. help beyond a few port units and some Navy and Marine advisers. The sea areas around Korea belonged to an independent command, the U.S. Seventh Fleet, which mainly operated off Vietnam. The ROK Navy, opined U.S. admirals, "could handle the north Korean Navy, which they strongly outgun." The ROKs also had an amphibious capability worth reckoning.⁵⁸ But the ROK fleet showed little capability against sea infiltrators—the most likely way in which the KPN would present itself.

The ROK also did not have any special counter guerrilla units or village militia in 1966, despite extensive experience battling partisans in 1950–53. Ad hoc contingents of the ROK Army and Korean National Police had sufficed to meet these disturbances. Unlike the DPRK, the ROK lacked an equivalent of the North Korean Ministry of Internal Affairs. The ROK Army, its Counterintelligence Corps, the National Police (KNP), and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) all pursued infiltrators.⁵⁹ But no central directive apparatus existed.

Given advantageous terrain and rough equivalence in numbers, the U.S.-ROK forces stood a good chance against a conventional North Korean attack. With all their nagging troubles, both the U.S. and ROK armies had made quantum improvements since the Korean War. But the enemy would not come that way again, at least not right away, and the U.S.-ROK forces lacked any concerted, systematic means of combating unconventional operations.

Time

American forces in Korea enjoyed an unaccustomed boon, rare in the post-1945 U.S. military experience: regardless of considerable grumbling in the military and among the citizenry, America had chosen to make a long-term military commitment to Korea. The U.S.-ROK 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty "remained in force indefinitely."⁶⁰ Of course, a major war in Korea might cause some reevaluation of that open-ended commitment. But America had accepted some DMZ casualties since 1953. As long as casualties stayed at that level, General Bonesteel had all the time he needed.

The South Koreans would not throw in the towel—regardless of the scale or duration of fighting. They definitely were in for as long and as much as it took to overcome any incursions. Any alternative amounted to national extinction.

Typically, one thinks of America constrained by time in war, particularly in a protracted insurgent struggle. Yet in this case, it was Kim Il-sung of North Korea who wanted quick results from his guerrillas. By simply holding on, without cracking and without escalating the conflict, the United States and the Republic of Korea would be victorious. In the Second Korean Conflict, time favored the allies.
