

Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low-Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966—1969

by Major Daniel P. Bolger



FOREWORD

Most Americans associate U.S. military operations in Korea with the Korean War, 1950—53. This is understandable in that the war, although limited in scope and objectives, was fought primarily with the weapons and tactics identified with conventional warfare. The Korean War is also remembered for the civil-military crisis it precipitated between the president of the United States, Harry Truman, and the commander of United Nations forces in Korea, General Douglas MacArthur. The Truman-MacArthur controversy is still capable of generating passionate discussion, even though the president, with the backing of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall, had little choice but to relieve the general of command if civilian control of the military was to be secured.

Less known to most Americans is the extended period of low-intensity conflict that North Korea conducted against South Korea in the mid to late 1960s. This period of hostilities had its dramatic moments, such as the seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, but for the most part, the tactics consisted of propaganda, infiltration, assassination plots, and guerrilla warfare. Because the war in Vietnam overshadowed these developments, the "unfinished war" in Korea has largely been ignored by military officers studying the nature and demands of modern warfare. In this sense, the label "forgotten war," often applied to the conventional war of the early 1950s, is much more applicable to the conflict on the peninsula from 1966 to 1969.

In Leavenworth Paper No. 19, Major Daniel P. Bolger, USA, has subjected the events and evolution of this more recent Korean conflict to close analytical scrutiny. The results of his effort require careful study. He not only describes in detail the vast range of military operations short of war that an adversary can employ against countries supported by the United States, but he also assesses how allied forces can adapt to the unexpected and devise countermeasures that, if not completely effective, can at least disrupt the designs of the adversary so he cannot obtain his primary objectives. Through the exemplary leadership of General Charles H. Bonesteel III, Bolger also demonstrates the importance of personality in warfare and the essential need for officers to recognize the dominance of political considerations at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. In short, Bolger's study reinforces current doctrine, which states emphatically that commanders and staff officers "must adopt courses of action which legally support those [political considerations] even if the courses of action appear to be unorthodox or outside what traditional doctrine had contemplated."



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Preface



When I was a young lieutenant, a battle-wise infantry officer named Colonel Walter B. Clark told me about a war that most Americans, including me, had never heard about. At the time, I listened to his stories with interest; there were so many provocative ideas and useful lessons to be considered, even for an inexperienced soldier. At one point in our discussions, I recall saying to the colonel that some day, someone should tell the story of this second Korean war.

This is my attempt to tell that story in a way that professional soldiers might find useful. I make no pretense of providing the complete account of the undeclared, unconventional struggle that gripped Korea between 1966 and 1969, although this effort may serve to refocus attention on a most intriguing chapter in the annals of American and Korean arms. Accordingly, this work is dedicated to Colonel Clark and all the other American and Korean veterans of the Second Korean Conflict. I would like also to thank Dr. Samuel Lewis, Dr. Lawrence A. Yates, Dr. Robert Berlin, Mr. Don Gilmore, and the diligent CSI staff for their kind assistance in this project.

Introduction



... this strategy would involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.

— Omar N. Bradley
General of the Army,
May 1951

Can Americans fight a successful counter guerrilla war? Thirty years ago, most American soldiers would have answered “yes.” The more historically minded might have justified that assertion by pointing to decades of U.S. Indian fighting, years in the Philippines battling Moros and Huks, several Marine Corps “Banana Wars” in Latin America, and the successful anti-Communist struggle in post-1945 Greece. “Any good soldier can handle guerrillas,” Army Chief of Staff General George H. Decker told President John F. Kennedy.¹ Kennedy and his brain trust decided to test Decker’s claim in a place called Vietnam.

America’s leaders, however, failed in their confused, tragic confrontation with insurgency in Southeast Asia—with plenty of blame to spare for all involved. A consensus emerged, both in the armed forces and in the wider body of interested citizenry: U.S. troops could not, would not, and should not become involved in any situations variously termed as counter guerrilla, cold war, counterinsurgency, stability, or (the current favorite) low-intensity conflict (LIC).

This idea persists virtually unchallenged. Contemporary operations in El Salvador, Panama, and the Philippines notwithstanding, few American professional soldiers have much stomach for counter guerrilla fighting. In a recent study, a high-level joint-service team concluded: “The United States does not understand low-intensity conflict nor does it display the capability to adequately defend against it.”² LIC is the “wrong war” for Americans and Vietnam *seemed* the proof that brooked no argument.

Still, the argument needs to be pursued, as its very premise may be based too much on one sad case. Accepting for the moment that Vietnam was indeed largely an insurgency (a contentious matter in its own right), one can still take issue with prevailing opinions. Does Vietnam prove that Americans cannot conduct successful LIC?

Before confronting this issue, it is critical to get definitions straight. Low-intensity conflict is war, deadly as any, but different in that its adherents stress the achievement of political goals by insurgency, terrorism, and provocation rather than traditional force-on-force military operations. Small countries can risk such bold efforts, even against the great powers and their allies, thanks to the paralyzing effects of the U.S.-USSR nuclear stalemate.

Nuclear weaponry places a definite brake on the superpowers. No matter how vital the interests involved, it is important for the superpowers to keep confrontations localized and small in scale, lest the United States and Soviet Union slip from confrontation into the maelstrom of high-intensity nuclear war. For superpowers, *severely limited means*, rather than limited ends, distinguish LIC from midintensity struggles. Means are now the only real variable; wars of unlimited aims are no longer much of an option for nuclear giants.

That explains why these shadow wars have found such favor among minor states. In their seemingly endless jockeying for advantage under the frustrating nuclear standoff, both superpowers have routinely backed their enemy's enemies. This has only strengthened the hands of determined local belligerents. A well-prosecuted guerrilla movement or terror campaign places an involved great power on the horns of a dilemma: should the great power increase its aims and risk nuclear war against the small power's sponsor or increase its means and risk diversions from more important areas?

America's adversaries have a built-in edge in that the Soviet Union and its allies espouse anti-American insurrection as a matter of basic philosophy. By Marxist lights, struggling against the capitalist United States is inevitable, and so adherents of communism have sound theoretical and practical foundations to support their fight. As America discovered in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Communist ideology, in both its Leninist and Maoist strains, provides an especially potent blueprint for countries interested in engaging and defeating the United States in a protracted struggle.

From the American perspective, LIC occurs when the U.S. military seeks limited aims with a relatively modest number of available regular forces. The "low" aspect of LIC refers directly to the degree of American commitment (certainly not to the level of violence or degree of enemy commitment). A few selected U.S. reserves may participate, but there is essentially no mobilization. Even a partial mobilization, whether formal (as in the Korean War) or informal (as in Vietnam), elevates the conflict to the mid-intensity realm, with all the resultant political hazards both at home and abroad.

Given this comprehensive definition, LIC necessarily comprises more than counterinsurgency. It entails almost any restrained use of U.S. military force to advance its interests in the Third World, to include peacekeeping, combating terrorism, and handling peacetime contingencies.³ Yet it is typical of the rather muddled views on this subject that many experts employ the terms "LIC" and "counterinsurgency" interchangeably. Whatever the Viet-

nam experience suggests about U.S. abilities to battle insurgents, it offers little insight into American capacities for peacekeeping, fighting terrorists, or handling a diverse grab bag of "contingencies" (i.e., everything from punitive bombings and rescue efforts to shows of force).

Even focusing on counterinsurgency, the historical record still does not support the commonplace pessimism about recent U.S. military performance. Vietnam was only one of several American counterinsurgency wars of the 1960s. U.S. operations in the Congo (1960–65), Thailand (1964–74), the Dominican Republic (1965–66), and Bolivia (1966–67) proceeded and concluded differently than the Vietnam War. Some work has been done to resurrect interest in these unique small wars, but in general, they have been forgotten in the continuing fascination with the much more massive, conventional, and unsuccessful Southeast Asian undertaking.

Perhaps the most interesting "other" LIC of the 1960s occurred in Korea. There, an understrength, conventionally trained force of Americans, in company with their Republic of Korea (ROK) allies, fought and won a low-intensity war on the Asian mainland. There was nothing unusual about the soldiers involved: the unusual thing proved to be the imaginative, thoughtful ways in which they were used.

The Second Korean Conflict flared up in November 1966. By the time it sputtered to an ill-defined end more than three years later, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had challenged the allies in every category of low-intensity conflict and failed. One would think that this case might merit a great deal of study—if only as a possible counterpoint to the usual litany of lessons about Vietnam.

Yet to understand why the Second Korean Conflict has been so rarely addressed, one would do well to return to Bradley's quotation. Only in this case, one must give a new twist to Bradley. Korea in 1968–69 was again the wrong war, but this time, it was wrong in a different way.

First, unlike the earlier war, the war in Korea in 1966–69 was not a conventional, stand-up war. By standard American doctrine, it was all wrong. The sporadic combat mainly devolved upon the ROK forces and population. While American leaders made most of the key decisions and provided certain absolutely critical combat forces and battlefield multipliers, the ROKs did the overwhelming bulk of the work. Shrewd U.S. officers ensured that the ROKs got the credit for decisions and plans, too. This was right and proper for a LIC environment, but it did not make for much popular excitement in the United States, especially compared with the concurrent American big-unit war in Vietnam.

Second, Korea was no more the preferred battlefield in the late 1960s than it had been in 1951. Korea constituted an economy-of-force theater. The "right place" was Southeast Asia. American commanders in Korea faced the difficult prospect of defending their area without daring to engender a second major Asian war. Only if the U.S. generals erred would they garner any special notice. The more they succeeded, the less attention they received. By the time it became evident that the Second Korean Conflict had been

won, it was equally obvious that the Vietnam War had been lost. Interest focused there and has remained so ever since.

Thus, the Second Korean Conflict has drifted into obscurity, a curious episode, a footnote to the Vietnam era. In light of the ongoing LIC debate, this Korean experience deserves exhumation and examination. Because smart U.S. commanders risked fighting the “wrong kind” of war in Korea from 1966–69, the situation did not boil up into the other wrong kind of war everyone feared most—the dreaded second land war in Asia. Thus, the story of the Second Korean Conflict is the story of a wrong war that turned out right.
