

## **VICTORY DISEASE AND INTELLIGENCE FAILURE IN THE KOREAN WAR (1950-53)**

### **Introduction**

Intelligence failure can be defined as “a misunderstanding of the situation that leads a government (or its military forces) to take actions that are inappropriate and counterproductive to its own interests” (Schulsky and Schmitt 2002: 63). Importantly, the definition offered by Abram Schulsky and Gary Schmitt is a broad one. Indeed, an intelligence failure may stem from the misestimate of the enemy’s strategic capabilities and intentions, but it may also lie inherently within a country’s own institutional intelligence setting. For instance, as this essay will argue, in order to avoid intelligence failure, not only must a country’s military leadership in a given conflict be able to correctly assess the enemy’s military power, doctrine and tactics, it must also hold a full appreciation of its own capabilities and limitations.

This essay will present a case in which intelligence failure was caused not by the lack of intelligence, but rather as a result of intelligence errors in the appreciation of both the enemy and one’s own capabilities. The failure, this essay will argue, was by and large due to the consequences of intelligence errors that resulted from what has been referred to as “victory disease”. Victory disease, the notion that political leaders, military commanders and their intelligence staff may have their assessments clouded when victory seems near (Karcher 2003), can explain how it was possible for the US leadership to miscalculate Chinese capabilities and intentions, when the Chinese in late 1950 crossed the Yalu River, and decisively altered the outcome of the Korean War.

## **Victory disease and the Chinese intervention in the Korean War**

The hypothesis of victory disease is that at that time when the enemy is on the verge of defeat and seems unable to surmount a last-minute counterattack, a country and its military leaders run the greatest risk of misjudging the enemy's strategic intentions and military capabilities.<sup>1</sup> James Dunnigan and Raymond Macedonia have argued that particularly nations with a history of military prowess are vulnerable to victory disease, and that this manifests itself through "arrogance, a sense of complacency, and the habit of using established patterns to fight future conflicts" (Dunnigan and Macedonia 1993: 21).

While "victory disease" in modern warfare has most often been exemplified with the German military defeat against the Soviets in 1941 and Japanese defeat in the Pacific Theater in the Second World War, the term has significant explanatory power as regards the final outcome of the Korean War. In particular, this essay argues that "victory disease" led to the significant underestimation of Chinese military capabilities as well as a misinterpretation of Chinese strategic intentions, when North Korea in 1950 was severely pushed back and on the verge of annihilation.

On the back of an impeccable service record in WW1 and WW2, General Douglas MacArthur, in 1950 the Commander-in-Chief of the US Far Eastern Command and of the UN Forces in Korea, had successfully retaken the offensive with an impressive strategic maneuver in which an amphibious landing at Incheon, deep behind enemy lines, had cut off North Korean supply lines. MacArthur was able to push North Korean forces back to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, and President Truman agreed to continue the offensive into North Korean soil, until in October 1950 North Korean forces were bordering on the Yalu River, the Chinese border. At this point, nothing was going to convince

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "victory disease" ("Shenshobyō" in Japanese) was coined by Japanese naval historian Chuko Ikezaki writing about Japanese naval strategy in the Pacific Theater in the 1930s (Stephan 1984: 64).

MacArthur that anything other than total victory and reunification of the Korean Peninsula was an acceptable outcome.

Intelligence reports, as this essay will show, suggests that MacArthur was well aware of the Chinese capabilities and at least the possibility of a Chinese intervention, but may have chosen subjectively to disregard the possibility that the Chinese could alter the outcome of the war even if they decided to intervene. MacArthur argued that “stopping his troops short of the Yalu, was tantamount to appeasement” (Khong 1992: 24). Although there may have already been “sound and political reasons for halting his army on that line [the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, ed.]”<sup>2</sup>, historian Lloyd Gardner argued that “[t]here were equally powerful reasons, primarily psychological and ideological, for not doing so” (Gardner 1972: 19). Moreover, some policy-makers in the US would later admit that they feared MacArthur’s prestige, while others feared for Cold War policies if the liberation of North Korea was not achieved (ibid). Indeed, Gardner reminds us that “the basic political decision to unite Korea by force was not a usurpation by an ambitious general in the field but an agreed-upon goal set forth in detailed instructions” (ibid, 18-19).

Also, MacArthur was not alone in assessing a Chinese intervention as unlikely. In a retrospective account of the Chinese intervention prepared at the U.S. Army Center of Military History (2003: paragraph 5), historian Richard Stewart noted that both U.S. diplomats and intelligence personnel discounted the risks of an intervention. Many argued that the window of opportunity for an intervention had past with the North Korean forces on its knees, and that “even if the Chinese decided to intervene, allied air power and firepower would cripple their ability to move or resupply their forces. The opinion of many military observers, some of whom had helped train the Chinese to

---

<sup>2</sup> In fact, President Truman had commissioned the National Security Council (NSC) to study the issue of whether to advance north across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel or simply eject the North Koreans from South Korean soil. NSC recommended against crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, to which the Joint Chiefs of Staff objected leading President Truman to ultimately go with the JCS recommendation (Chambers II 1999).

fight against the Japanese in World War II, was that the huge infantry forces that could be put in the field would be poorly equipped, poorly led, and abysmally supplied” (Stewart 2003, paragraph 5). Also the CIA supported the idea that the time for intervention had past, and that though the Chinese could intervene effectively, they could not do so decisively, and the CIA therefore concluded “that the Chinese would continue to give only covert aid to the North Koreans” (Cohen 1990: 138).

The most categorical proponents of the view that China would not get involved, however, was MacArthur himself and his Far Eastern Command (FEC) Intelligence Chief, Major General Charles A. Willoughby. MacArthur and Willoughby “continued to insist, despite the CCF [Chinese Communist Forces, ed.] attacks at Unsan and similar attacks against X Corps in northeastern Korea, that the Chinese would not intervene in force. On 6 November the FEC continued to list the total of Chinese troops in theater as only 34,500, whereas in reality over 300,000 CCF soldiers organized into thirty divisions had already moved into Korea. The mysterious disappearance of Chinese forces at that time seemed only to confirm the judgment that their forces were only token "volunteers" (Stewart 2003: 6).

On October 15, 1950, when General MacArthur and President Truman met on Wake Island in what should have been follow-up to Washington’s precautionary instructions, but instead became a victory celebration, MacArthur offered the well-remembered assessment that he would have the troops home before Christmas (Gardner 1972: 20). Displaying clearly the victory disease symptoms of arrogance and complacency, MacArthur would soon see how poorly they had judged not only Chinese intentions and capabilities, but more importantly the Chinese tactics that turned out to be much different from those of the North Korean forces.

## **Pre-intervention intelligence failure**

Although the Chinese intervention in 1950 is often referred to as a strategic surprise attack<sup>3</sup>, the intelligence present at the time suggests that a Chinese intervention and its nature were indeed foreseeable. Firstly, the intelligence in regard to Chinese capabilities, and in particular the number of troops China that were mobilizing on its Yalu River border, did not suggest a defensive force. Secondly, prevailing intelligence suggested that China's strategic intentions indeed included a large-scale intervention in the Korean War. Thirdly, there was evidence to suggest that the *modus operandi* of the Chinese People's Army (PLA), should they intervene, would be much different from that of the North Korean forces. And finally, there were self-imposed political restraints on the UN Forces' ability to bring to bear its superior air power on Chinese soil as well as limits to the effects of this air power against an enemy that did not have a history of fighting a conventional war along roads, but rather an unconventional one across the hills.

As regards the assessments of Chinese capabilities in the border area, MacArthur and Willoughby, surprisingly, continued to underestimate the number of Chinese forces already in Korea. On November 25<sup>th</sup> 1950, the FEC estimated that some 70,000 Chinese troops had crossed the Yalu River,<sup>4</sup> while only five days later it would triple this estimate to nearly 210,000, which still turned out to be approx. 90,000 too low. As Eliot Cohen argues, “[i]ronically, then, FEC intelligence had a better grasp of the size and disposition of Chinese forces *not* in contact with UN troops in Korea, than those who actually were” (Cohen 1990: 133). FEC estimated a Chinese force of more than 400,000 on the Chinese side of the Yalu River in early November (*ibid.*), but, astonishingly, still did not believe that these were in preparation for a large-scale intervention. On this point, only the State Department's Edmund Clubb disagreed. Already in mid-October, based on evidence of Chinese

---

<sup>3</sup> Lonn Waters (2005) argued convincingly that it was rather an operational as opposed to a strategic surprise attack.

<sup>4</sup> According to Eliot Cohen (1990: 136), at this point approx. 300,000 Chinese troops had already been in Korea for ten days.

propaganda campaigns as well as his understanding of Chinese Communist ideology, Clubb viewed large-scale Chinese intervention as likely. Tokyo and Washington, however, agreed that although the Chinese were augmenting the size of their forces in the border area, they would “refrain from a massive effort [...] in part because the optimum time to do so had passed” (Cohen 1990: 139). Remarkably, as noted by the CIA’s P.K. Rose (2001), “no one in either the FEC or the CIA thought 400,000 PLA troops a rather large number for a defensive force.”

It was not until mid-November that there was consensus in the US intelligence community that a large-scale Chinese intervention was under way. As regards the Chinese intentions, the FEC did not accept the position “that China’s intention was to protect the Manchurian border and its hydroelectric plants” (Rose 2001), a view that both the CIA and the Department of Defense stubbornly adhered to (Cohen 1990: 140). Instead, the FEC, which had itself stubbornly henceforth maintained that the Chinese would not intervene, did now suggest that a new and dominant Asian power was emerging, a power that according to MacArthur was becoming “aggressively imperialistic with a lust for expansion” suggesting that the Chinese intervention had turned into “a serious proximate threat” (ibid, 140-141). At this time, however, several messages had already been relayed to the U.S. through Indian diplomatic channels expressing China’s concern over the advancement of the UN Forces. In addition to these messages, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman issued the following 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” (Rose 2001). However, with the United States at the time “seeking to isolate Communist China diplomatically, they were very few way to verify these warnings” (Stewart 2003, paragraph 5), and instead they were regarded as a bluff not only by the FEC, but also in Washington. Notably, President Truman characterized it as “a bald attempt to blackmail the United Nations” (McGovern 1972: 11), and it was suggested by the

Secretary of State Acheson that a Chinese intervention would be “sheer madness” (Gardner 1972: 21), while MacArthur already earlier at the Wake Island discussions with President Truman had remarked that “if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter” (Cohen 1990: 139).

By the fall of 1950 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” (Rose 2001). The premise for this assessment, however, was a false one. It was based on the idea that Chinese forces, if they intervened, would employ similar tactics as the North Korean forces, and not be able to withstand the superior air power of the UN Forces. However, Chinese forces would employ a much different tactical *modus operandi* resembling that which “the Japanese had used in their victories over the British in Malaya and Burma in 1942 avoiding the roads” (Carver 1986: 780). “Chinese units preferred infiltration and envelopment [...] they attacked close-in and at night, crushing enemy positions by repeated attacks rather than a single ‘human wave’” (Cohen 1990: 143). This significantly reduced the effects of US air power.

It was the mistaken confidence in the U.S. air power that would be the main driver for the FEC’s misestimate of the Chinese military effectiveness and strategic intentions. Firstly, Washington’s self-imposed restraints disallowed the use of air strikes on Chinese territory, and hence, “[t]o his intense annoyance, MacArthur found his freedom of action restrained for what he saw as political reasons, a situation that ran counter to the U.S. Army’s concept of how wars should be conducted”<sup>5</sup> (Carver 1986: 780). Even the intelligence collection efforts were hampered by these restraints inasmuch as “directives designed to reduce provocation of the Chinese also reduced the intelligence

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael Carver (1986: 780) remarked that “[w]hen Dwight D. Eisenhower succeeded Harry S. Truman as President in 1953, he was determined that the most powerful nation in the world should not again find itself suffering casualties in such an outdated form of warfare, in which its modern armed forces, liberally equipped with firepower, were unable to force a decision.”

collection capacity against them; reconnaissance beyond the Yalu was prohibited and constrained even close to the border” (Betts 1982: 58). Secondly, MacArthur mistakenly believed that “U.S. supremacy in the air could be used as effectively against the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) as it had been against the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA). Ultimately, this mistaken judgment reflected a failure to assess the significance of the differences between the heavily mechanized and hence road-bound NKPA (formed on the Soviet model) and the unmechanized and non-road-bound PLA, whose more dispersed infantry hordes presented less lucrative targets for aerial attack” (Schulsky and Schmitt 2002: 204).

Although the U.S. intelligence apparatus did suffer from a number of challenges with respect to intelligence collection and analysis including collection restraints, organizational and material bottlenecks, unreliable sources in the form of particularly the biased views of the Kuomintang, “data were neither so voluminous and confusing as to confuse the analyst, nor so skimpy as to preclude accurate assessment” suggesting that the intelligence failure lay in the analyses themselves (Cohen 1990: 135).

So why, if the intelligence suggested large numbers of Chinese forces already in North Korea or at least in the border area, if the Chinese had already since early October 1950 operated on North Korean territory, and if the Chinese had already relayed signals through Indian diplomatic channels that they would intervene if U.S. troops approached the Yalu River, were the UN Forces caught off-guard? As argued above, for some it was a question of individual culpability accusing MacArthur for “his cavalier ‘disregard for China’”, and accusing Willoughby for being “an arrogant, opinionated sycophant” (Cohen 1990: 129). For others, the intervention by the Chinese was considered a brilliant surprise attack achieved through “extraordinary march and camouflage discipline...[as well as] immunity from American tactical signal intelligence detection enforced by the Chinese lack of radios below the regimental level” (ibid, 143). However, as argued in Eliot

Cohen's 1990 examination of the American intelligence available before the Chinese intervention, both views "vastly oversimplify" this intelligence failure, which was much more complex in nature. Cohen himself agreed that the successful Chinese intervention had indeed been due to the skill of this "ingenious and well-disciplined foe"<sup>6</sup> (Cohen 1990: 145) helped along by an overly confident MacArthur. The Chinese misleading efforts included the use of "volunteers" in the initial phase only to be replaced by the tougher and more skilled Communist forces in later phases. According to Peng Dehuai, the Commander-in-Chief of the People's Volunteer Army, the Chinese "employed the tactics of purposely showing [themselves] to be weak, increasing the arrogance of the enemy, letting him run amuck, and luring him deep into [their] areas" (Cohen 1990: 136). This was hardly surprising, and merely reflected the Chinese approach to war based on Sun Tzu's ideas that "all warfare is based on deception; pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance" (ibid). In the end, what MacArthur disregarded as Chinese bluff, was in fact a clear-cut case of Chinese military doctrine.

In one of only a few analyses of the concept of victory disease in modern warfare, Major Timothy Karcher (2003: 2) suggested that "[u]nderestimating one's potential enemies comes with arrogance since the confident party views his own forces as unbeatable and the opponent as hardly worth consideration." Later, arrogance turns into complacency, nowhere more evident than in the failure to pay due attention to the enemy's past and present actions. Complacency will ultimately lead to plans designed on the false belief that "the enemy cannot disrupt friendly actions" (Karcher 2003: 41). MacArthur's various statements did in fact suggest that he did not fully appreciate how the Chinese would operate if they intervened. Arrogance and complacency would lead him to expect a conventional enemy similar to the NKPA, when the tactics of the PLA were actually well-recorded

---

<sup>6</sup> Examples of Chinese deception and discipline included setting forest fires as smoke screens when having to move in daylight (Waters 2005: 69), and as noted by Bong Lee "they even marched during daytime, pretending to be ROKs, knowing that the airplanes would not be able to tell the difference" (Lee 2003: 160).

in their fight against the Chinese Nationalists in the years immediately preceding the Korean War. In fact, Mao's treatise *On Protracted War* published in 1938 had noted that Chinese tactics should be based on a "high degree of mobility in difficult terrain, and featured by the swift attack and withdrawal, swift concentration and dispersal" (McGovern 1972: 46). Unfortunately, MacArthur and his commanders would confuse Mao's doctrine of protracted warfare with weakness and reluctance to fight, and equally important as described by Max Hastings (1987: 137): "the generals were not looking for anything of this sort. They had persuaded themselves that war was all but over. Their senses were deadened to any fresh perception."

## **Conclusion**

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the intelligence failure related to the Chinese intervention in the Korean War: Firstly, the political leadership and its military commanders become particularly vulnerable when victory seems at its closest.<sup>7</sup> Any intelligence that at this time points to the contrary should be analyzed carefully. Secondly, aside from intelligence assessments of the enemy's force numbers, more emphasis should be put on an analysis of the enemy's intentions and capabilities. Thirdly, any intelligence analysis that challenges the current assumptions about the enemy must be devoted particular attention and examination.

Intelligence analysis is not the product of one individual or even in the case of the U.S. military apparatus one organization. Rather, intelligence "takes place in an institutional setting [...] so that the final result is more the product of a system than of any individual" (Schulsky and Schmitt 2002: 64). While the FEC and in particular MacArthur himself was the most categorical proponent of view that the Chinese would not intervene, and even if they did, would not be able to upset the UN

---

<sup>7</sup> Lonny Waters came to the same conclusion in his study of operational surprise attacks when he stated that "it is critical to remain wary of an enemy whose military capacity to resist appears to be low" (Waters 2005: 81).

advance decisively, it is important to remember that similar analyses could be found at the CIA, the Department of Defense and in the Truman administration. Only, Edmund Clubb at the State Department early on supported the notion that Chinese intervention was likely. According, however, to Max Hastings (1987: 134), Clubb's "persistent pessimism on the issue undermined his credibility." Instead of dismissing Clubb's assessment due to the fact that it did not fit well with the conventional wisdom in Washington and Tokyo, his views, had they been devoted further examination, may have led to a better appreciation certainly of the Chinese intentions.

Another lesson to be learnt relates to the issue of self-imposed political restraints. As we saw, intelligence collection was severely hampered by Washington's efforts to avoid provoking the Chinese. With restricted aerial reconnaissance over Chinese territory, difficulty in reconstituting the covert collection efforts that had been in place both in China and North Korea before the invasion, and the inability to communicate directly with the Chinese leadership (a consequence of the choice to diplomatically isolate Communist China), had all led to Chinese intentions becoming anyone's academic guess with only Edmund Clubb at the State Department getting it right. Arguably, Washington, having already determined that the ultimate objective was the reunification of the Korean peninsula and being well aware of China's support to the North Koreans, should not have held back on its intelligence collection efforts on Chinese soil, nor should it have accepted the FEC's cavalier assessment of Chinese capabilities and assessments.

In the end, Washington was only too willing to accept MacArthur's unwavering assessment of the situation even when much of the intelligence pointed in another direction. MacArthur's mirror-imaging<sup>8</sup> had helped him well in the past, and neither President Truman nor any other high level official was ready to admit that the war hero's luck was running out. Victory disease instead of

---

<sup>8</sup> Mirror-imaging is the process of assessing the enemy's intentions based on one's own assumptions (Schulsky and Schmitt 2002: 67).

having struck only one individual had become something of an epidemic infecting most of the U.S. high-level decision-makers and clouding the assessments of the intelligence community. This was perhaps not surprising considering the fact that at no other time in history did the achievement of total victory seem more readily attainable than when in the fall of 1950, the North Korean People's army was on its knees, relying solely on the support of a primitive group of volunteer Chinese north of the Yalu River. However, the U.S. would soon, and not for the last time, learn the advantages of apparent backwardness in military conflicts.

## **Bibliography**

Betts, Richard K. (1982): *Surprise Attacck: Lessons for Defense Planning*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.

Carver, Michael (1986): “Conventional Warfare in the Nuclear Age” in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy – from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Cohen, Eliot (1990): “‘Only Half the Battle’: American Intelligence and the Chinese Intervention in Korea, 1950” in *Intelligence and National Security*, 5: 1, 129-149.

Dunnigan, James and Raymond Macedonia (1993): *Getting It Right: American Military Reforms After Vietnam to the Gulf War and Beyond*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Gardner, Lloyd C., ed. (1972): *The Korean War*. New York: New York Times.

Hastings, Max (1987): *The Korean War*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Karcher, Thomas (2003): “Understanding the “Victory Disease,” From the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond,” *Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 3*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press.

Khong, Yuen Foong (1992): *Analogies at War. Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

McGovern, James (1972): *To the Yalu: From the Chinese Invasion of Korea to MacArthur’s Dismissal*. New York: William Morrow & Company Inc.

Rose, P.K. (2001): "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950," *Studies in Intelligence*, No. 11, 57-65. Central Intelligence Agency.

Chambers II, J. W. (1999): *Oxford Companion to American Military History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schulsky, Abram N. and Gary J. Schmitt (2002): *Silent Warfare. Understanding The World of Intelligence*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books.

Stephan, John J. (1984): *Hawaii Under The Rising Sun: Japan's Plans for Conquest After Pearl Harbor*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Waters, Lonn A. (2005): *Secrecy, Deception and Intelligence Failure: Explaining Operational Surprise in War*. Master Thesis at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.