PATRONS!

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Episode 47: Ike Will Bring Them Home! This is our penultimate episode, and as such plays a critical role in bringing several threads of our narrative together. How fluent in the use of atomic diplomacy was Eisenhower’s administration? Armed with the knowledge we have from the last episode, we can state that Eisenhower was far from the first President to bring atomic weapons into the diplomatic discourse. Indeed, it makes sense that the first and last president of the US to make use of the atomic bomb should make the most active use of it in diplomacy. In addition, contrary to the conventional view, Eisenhower’s administration failed in the last phase of the Korean War to actually formulate a coherent policy regarding nuclear weapons and diplomatic pressure. For a number of reasons, the former General was content to drag his feet.



Dispensing with the myths of atomic diplomacy enables us to look more closely at the very real role which the Indians played in putting forward the policy ideas in the UN General Assembly, most notably in the case of the touchy prisoners issue. The genuine importance of Indian diplomacy in that institution has been greatly understated for some time, and in this episode we’ll give them their proper due. The Chinese will of course also need to be considered, since if atomic diplomacy did not force them to make peace, what can we say actually did? The answer has as much to do with the policy of bluff as it does with the death of Josef Stalin, and it’s another fascinating journey I can’t wait to take you on! Of course, the major appeal of this episode is in the loose ends are tied up – it is in this instalment of our series that the Korean War is finally brought to its anticlimactic end on 27th July 1953.

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Music used:
“Snap Your Fingers” by Al Jolson, released in 1912. Available: http://freemusicarchive.org/music/Al\_Jolson/Antique\_Phonograph\_Music\_Program\_01202015/Snap\_Your\_Fingers\_\_-\_Al\_Jolson\_1386

Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to the KW episode 47. Last time we introduced you to the concept of nuclear diplomacy, a tactic which had developed over the different stages of the KW as the Truman administration experienced adversity, triumph and severe struggles. We saw how President Truman was content to move the nuclear chess pieces around the board, but that he never seriously considered using them under the circumstances, even when the PRC intervened, and launched their blistering counteroffensives over spring 1951. The allies were able to hold on under this onslaught, and after removing the man who had countenanced the sowing of a field of nuclear waste along the communist supply lines, Truman seemed content to allow General Ridgeway to do his thing in Korea, and do it he did. The truce negotiations proceeded apace during the summer months, but what appeared first like a positive step soon was soon revealed as a cynical communist delaying tactic, as their troops dug in and the potential for great gains in the war vanished.

During this period, the Truman administration’s use of nuclear weapons to gain leverage and apply pressure against the communists was used fluidly, as Washington adapted to the constantly changing circumstances both at home and abroad. In the final analysis, it seems highly improbable that the Truman administration ever seriously considered making use of these weapons, and inflicting nuclear fire on the Chinese. Only in certain circumstances, such as the direct Soviet involvement in Korea, or the touching off of WW3 in Western Europe for example, would nuclear weapons be used, and even then, Truman had established a new subcommittee of the NSC for the very purpose of ensuring that such weapons would only be used as a last resort. This, as we learned last time, doesn’t mean Truman was singularly opposed to the use of nuclear weapons, but it does mean that the President appreciated that the cons of using such weapons outweighed the pros.

In this episode, we’ll bring this analysis of atomic diplomacy to its conclusion, and note how a different administration sought to present *its* policy towards nuclear weapons in the twilight moments of the KW. Let’s see what went down then, as we begin our penultimate episode of the KW…

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How do you bring a war to a conclusion? I'll tell you how Korea was ended. We got in there and had this messy war on our hands. Eisenhower let the word go out – let the word go out diplomatically – to the Chinese and North [Koreans] that he would not tolerate this continual ground war of attrition. And within a matter of months, they negotiated.

These were the words of Richard Nixon in a private conversation to the Republican caucus in 1968, and his views were mirrored again by his rival, Lyndon B. Johnson, who noted during an interview with the *NYT* that same year that after ‘investigating carefully every possible course of action, I always come back to the warning of President Harry S. Truman about how unchallenged aggression could lead to another world war.’ In that same interview did the *NYT* conclude that as ‘Mr. Johnson views his history, Korea is indeed the strategic and political parallel of Vietnam…Thus he has tried to steer along the narrow path that avoids military escalation great enough to provoke Chinese intervention once again.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

What are we to make of such observations, and of the belief which noted how effective the threat of a great and terrible use of force had been during the last phase of the KW. If we are to believe Nixon, we would come away with the impression that Eisenhower forced a resolution to the conflict with the Chinese through the application of atomic diplomacy. Under the burden of such threats, Mao decided that it wasn’t worth tempting fate, and instructed his officials to make peace. When this outcome is combined with the massively expanded military capabilities of the US under NSC 68 and the sanctioning of containment, everything seems to have come together. Wouldn’t it be nice if I could highlight this culmination of forces, of the different threads of our story together, as proof of my own hypothesis explaining the reasons behind the KW? Yes, indeed it would.

As I’ve said before though, forcing peace upon the communists was far from the only instance where the fruits of NSC 68 were used. The very conflict of which Nixon and President Johnson spoke in the late 60’s – Vietnam – had come into being precisely because of containment, that new American foreign policy approach launched in the prelude to the KW, and crystallised during it. Indeed, the resulting explosion in American defence capabilities made the incredible investment in Vietnam actually possible, just as much as the experience of Korea shaped how Washington viewed communism and its role in the world. American leaders, as much as their peers, looked back to previous experiences for guidance and inspiration. The KW, and in particular Eisenhower’s blunt instrument approach to solving the Korean problem, seemed to suggest to American leaders 15 years later that in this other Asian conflict, a similar approach would bear similar fruit. As we know though, the reality in both Vietnam and in the final phases of the KW was far from so simple.

In spite of what Secretary of State John Foster Dulles would later claim, and what the historical consensus seems to suggest, neither Dulles nor his President had honed their policy towards nuclear weapons all that much. In addition, Eisenhower went to Korea, as he had promised, but he studiously avoided discussing what was deemed Op-Plan 8-52, the US strategy which called for the use of nuclear weapons in and beyond Korea in conjunction with an advance to the narrow waist of the peninsula, with UN Commander Mark W. Clark. Clark had replaced General Ridgeway after Ridgeway had replaced Eisenhower at NATO, but Clark was no more willing than Ridgeway had been to use nuclear weapons, and he deferred always to Washington. Op-Plan 8-52, a document which we’re meeting here for the first time, is largely unimportant in this debate precisely because of Eisenhower’s spurning of it. Had he wanted to, in other words, Eisenhower could have made use of a pre-existing plan for the use of nuclear weapons to apply pressure on the communists in NK, and he could even have brought forward some phases of the plan to demonstrate that he meant business. But Eisenhower chose not to, and he also determinedly ignored MacArthur’s loony advice to sow a nuclear wasteland along the Yalu River.

To some extent, caution and circumspection made good political sense at home and abroad. Domestically, they prevented a split within the Republican Party between those who thought along MacArthurian lines and the more knowledgeable and conservative legislators who feared that using atomic weapons in Korea might reduce the American nuclear stockpile to the point of weakening global deterrence. Internationally, circumspect actions and imprecise words kept adversaries and allies uncertain of the new administration's intentions and fostered an impression of toughness which Dulles thought potentially useful in negotiations. However, on the other hand, once in office, the new leaders had to think, speak, and act in more concrete terms. From the second week of February through the end of May 1953, the Eisenhower administration used the NSC as a forum in which to consider alternative ways to end the Korean fighting.

Some analysts have interpreted their discussions, which touched on options ranging up to military use of atomic weapons in and beyond the peninsula, as a prologue to attempted nuclear pressure. They link the NSC's approval of contingency plans for the use of nuclear arms to John Foster Dulles's "signalling" that intention to Beijing by way of New Delhi, where the Indians eagerly awaited any development which could help bring the KW to an end. If the negotiators at Panmunjom had not quickly reached a settlement acceptable to Washington, these observers have suggested, limited war in Korea might well have become nuclear. Close analysis and comparison of the Eisenhower administration's behaviour in the spring of 1953 with the Truman administration's actions two years earlier, however, suggest more modest conclusions about the NSC discussions in particular and about the role of atomic diplomacy in ending the war in general.

The NSC deliberations proved more discursive than decisive. They took place in relatively permissive circumstances rather than under the crisis conditions that beset the Truman administration. The enemy, rather than threatening escalation, showed signs of interest in accommodation, and the Eisenhower administration moved in a time when the KW was at least tempered by the fact that everyone was war weary and a location for peace talks existed, whereas Truman’s administration endured a year of weighted developments before the peace table was used.[[2]](#footnote-2) This helps to explain why Eisenhower’s predecessor had been more fluid and adaptive to the question of nuclear weapons, and it also explains why Washington attempted to make use of their atomic advantage in several different ways. Truman’s actions were also held under much greater scrutiny than Eisenhower’s, as his administration seemed to blunder from error to error, and it proved wholly unable to solve the Korean crisis.

By Eisenhower’s succession, public interest in the conflict was at an all-time low, even if public weariness and frustration at the war was at a record high. This has to be juxtaposed with the honeymoon period granted to Eisenhower’s administration, all of which combines to produce a picture of a much less stressful Korean situation than that which had so vexed Truman. Under these circumstances, Eisenhower’s administration actually dallied a lot more than we may have expected. Take for example those several NSC meetings in the first half of 1953. In seven of those meetings, only two of them ever saw all of the administration’s figures present at the same time. In one meeting in mid-February, the NSC refused to deploy nuclear-ready B29s to Tokyo, and they refused to place nuclear weapons in UN Commander Mark Clark’s hands.

Since the administration seemed unable to agree on the use of nuclear weapons, an outcome provided for in Op-Plan 8-52, the joint chiefs referred it to the Joint Strategic Survey Committee (JSSC) for study on a routine rather than an urgent basis. The report produced a month later bared sharp inter-service differences. While air force and navy staffers thought nuclear bombing might constitute sufficient pressure to force China into accepting reasonable armistice terms, other figures, including the army chief of staff, disagreed. The alternative viewpoint was that only concerted ground, sea, and air operations promised success in an advance northward to the narrow waist of the peninsula or to the Yalu. Division of this sort didn’t exactly bode well for the timely conclusion of the war. During one NSC meeting in late March, Eisenhower signalled that he didn’t even know the exact size of America’s nuclear stockpile. Adding to this picture, on 8th April 1953, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Omar Bradley, even suggested that the "best solution for Korea" was "to drag our feet."[[3]](#footnote-3)

How do we reconcile these procrastinatory, timid approaches to Korea within the Eisenhower administration with the generally parroted view that Eisenhower firmly embraced the nuclear weapons at his disposal to bring about the end of the KW? We should note that in addition to the apparent hesitancy of Eisenhower’s administration came the apparent willingness of the communists to talk terms, likely because of Josef Stalin’s death in early March. Yet even that seismic event in the history of the Soviet Union does not fully explain why and how the Chinese came to warm to ideas of peace. The arrival of the armistice was the product of the general war weariness of the parties involved, as much as it was the product of Soviet peace-making, and the proposals of the Indian delegation to the UN. The prisoners issue was as contentious a sticking point to the allied and communist side in summer 1953 as it had been when it first became an issue in spring 1952, and the Indian proposals had attempted to disassemble this stumbling block, a process which slowly gained ground as the months progressed.

To explain how the armistice was produced, we also have to consider the very regime change which the US underwent. In line with this, the historian Edward Friedman noted that:

One must not forget how important seeming tough on Communists came to be for President Truman. He subsequently commented that he would have been hanged had he ever agreed to the armistice terms which Eisenhower approved. This ability of the more right-wing presidential candidate to deal more freely with supposed radicals abroad has often been commented upon. If true, then the Truman Administration itself as part of the dynamics of American politics was a major obstacle to peace. An end to the war had to await Eisenhower's ascension to power.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Regime changes in both the US *and* USSR at these critical moments cannot be overlooked as critical factor in the facilitation of peace. Consider again Stalin’s death and his replacement by a cabal of nervous, competing high Soviet officials. Historians and analysts, writing in the 1960s, gave several interpretations of the peace negotiations which unfolded in spring 1953 to explain why the KW came to an end. One of these, penned by Harold Hinton in 1966, explained Stalin’s death not as something which freed the Chinese to make peace under Soviet blessing, but which forced Mao to sue for peace, since Stalin’s support was absent after his death. Hinton wrote:

The Chinese were probably convinced that Stalin had been contemplating at least diversionary action on their behalf, [and] almost certainly demanded as much from his successors.... In addition, the Chinese probably pressed for immediate transfer of operational nuclear weapons and delivery systems, with the necessary instruction in use, as well as long-term aid in the creation of a Chinese nuclear weapons program.[[5]](#footnote-5) There is at least a strong possibility that never since 1945 (except perhaps in October 1962) has the world stood as close to general war as it did in February 1953; that much of this danger stemmed from an apparent willingness on Stalin's part to take drastic action, partly on behalf of the Chinese People's Republic and in connection with the Korean war.[[6]](#footnote-6)

There is something dissatisfying and vague about Hinton’s note here. That the Chinese were ‘probably’ convinced of Stalin’s determination to take action of their behalf; that the Chinese ‘probably’ pressed for immediate aid from Stalin to create their own nuclear program; that there was a ‘strong possibility’ that the world had never stood so close to war as it did in February 1953, or that the ‘apparent willingness’ on Stalin’s part to take drastic action helped to spur the Chinese on. To me, this sounds like Hinton’s way of saying, in 1966, that he did not know for sure what Stalin’s death meant to the Chinese, but that he was interpreting the evidence in a certain way, based on the visit of Chinese officials to Moscow in late February 1953.

In his book, Harold Hinton presented Mao as being constrained by Stalin’s death not because a load of Soviet peacekeepers emerged in the Soviet high command, but because Stalin had supported Mao, and that upon the former’s death, the latter effectively lost a key ally. This, of course, does not gel at all with our presentation of Stalin up to this point. In many respects I find Hinton’s presentation unconvincing, and this is probably because the necessary source materials were not available to him in 1966, and so he had to do his best to interpret and estimate what occurred based on his own experience and what conventional wisdom seemed to suggest. I felt it wouldn’t be right to ignore this fascinating interpretation of Stalin’s death, even if I do take issue with its conclusions, and that’s why I’m presenting it to you here, but there’s a few more things I’d like to say about Hinton’s interpretation before we move on.

Since our explanation for the outbreak of the KW would be different to much of the books and articles published in the few decades after the conclusion of that conflict, it is worth considering how our understanding of Stalin helps to explain why the KW ended as it did. Because Stalin was central to the outbreak of the KW, and because it flowed from his policy objectives for China and the West, it follows that he would not seek to bring it to an end unless he had very good cause to do so. There is no convincing evidence, short of Hinton’s conjectures, that Stalin decided to help facilitate an end to the war. Why would he do that, when the war was his brainchild to begin with?

Yet, at the same time, because of our understanding of Stalin, we can do some interpreting of our own. Hinton had the wrong overall idea of Stalin, because he presented Stalin’s support of Mao during the Sino-Soviet meeting in February 1953 as evidence of the Soviet support for the Chinese in the face of the American pressures and blustering. But how do we explain evidence which points to Stalin’s support of the Chinese in February 1953? Well, if we maintain that Stalin’s major objective was to keep the Chinese and Americans engaged in a costly conflict for political and strategic reasons, then it follows that his actions were designed to entrench that conflict, and prevent its speedy conclusion. When the Chinese emerged from their meeting and seemed content to face down the American threats, safe in the knowledge that Stalin would support them in their calling of the American bluff, so he said, we can see our central hypothesis validated.

Stalin encouraged the Chinese to stand firm and call Washington’s bluff because he knew this would prolong the war. If he had signalled his unwillingness to support the Chinese, or if he had advised them in stringent terms to talk terms, then Mao may well have felt sufficient pressure to reconsider his approach to the war. As it stood over 1952-53, the dominant peace moves were made in the UN, where the Indians, as we saw, continued to put forward their proposals for a compromise in the thorny prisoners issue. Stalin, mindful of the Indian efforts to subdue this war he had played the dominant role in launching, had to intercept these initiatives, and sought to do so by putting some steel into his Chinese ‘allies’ to resist the Americans, stand up to the West knowing that Moscow supported them, and be in turn less likely to accept the Indian efforts.

It was all connected, and in my mind, this interpretation of events makes the most sense. At all times when examining the behaviour of Stalin, Truman et al, we must ask ourselves – what did they have to *gain*? Stalin was probably the most cynical of all the actors involved in the KW, and my central, guiding principle throughout this series has been that we cannot understand or appreciate the war in Korea unless we understand the way Stalin looked at the world. Every advantage he could squeeze out of the KW was a bonus for him, and I have yet to find a convincing reason to explain why Stalin would seek peace in Korea, or why Stalin would initiate some kind of talks. Historians normally propose Soviet weariness with the conflict, or a desire for economic rebuilding as the reasons for Stalin’s overtures to Mao. Having launched and then manipulated the conflict, the fruits of Stalin’s labours surely could not last much longer, owing to the mutual weariness on both sides. Knowing this, Stalin was that much more eager to try something new to prolong the agony, and granting some firm support to the Chinese was just such a strategy – by claiming to support their efforts, Mao would be less willing to compromise, and more encouraged to push the allies harder.

Harold Hinton was therefore correct to note that a great deal changed once Stalin died. Yet, it wasn’t Stalin’s selfless support of his ally that Mao lost on 5th March 1953, but the latest scheme of a paranoid, ruthless figure determined to wrest all he could out of the latest developments. Hinton’s conclusions and interpretations, like so many historians of the KW, miss the critical point of Stalin’s motive. For as long as the KW continued, Stalin believed the USSR was in its safest and most strategically favourable position in world affairs. With the West and China at loggerheads in a theatre which did not interest or concern him, Stalin could rest easy and develop plans to capitalise on the distraction. In the end, much of what Stalin did was consolidate the communist hold over Eastern Europe, develop the Warsaw Pact and present a strong foil to Western ambitions to expand their own influences into Germany or elsewhere.

Once Stalin died, foreign adventures like the KW, and schemes like putting steel into the Chinese for the sake of prolonging everyone’s least favourite conflict, no longer appealed to the Soviet leadership, which resembled a committee of paranoid, conflicting personalities all eager to survive and then acquire the dominant leadership position. Since on the surface all one sees is a change of policy towards China, with immediate results for Mao’s own ability to resist the American bluffs, generations of historians have missed the critical question of why Stalin supported the Chinese in the first place. Examining the changing Soviet leadership isn’t something we have time for in this series, but it is something we’ll investigate in our Patreon series *1956*. In my view, Stalin’s schemes just before his death were the continuation of a policy towards Korea he had pursued since he first decided to support Kim Il-sung’s ambition in January 1950. It was precisely because Stalin’s policy towards Korea and China was so cynical, cunning, manipulative, secretive and effective that most have missed its true principles. Hopefully now we appreciate a little better just how central to the KW the person of Josef Stalin was; Mao Zedong, having been led on a wild ride by him all the way, certainly understood that everything would be different without him leading from Moscow.

While we have punched a few holes in it, Harold Hinton’s point of view regarding Stalin’s support of the Chinese in February 1953 was taken up by the historian Edward Friedman a decade later for his article examining atomic diplomacy and the end of the war. Friedman, like Hinton, wrote before the bulk of critically important source materials were released, but this does not mean that Hinton’s, Friedman’s or any other historian writing before the sources were truly unwrapped during the 1980s should be ignored. If you’re really confused by what’s going on right now, all you really have to remember is this: first, Stalin never did anything that didn’t bring him some benefit, and second, Friedman’s thesis, as do many other historians who wrote on atomic diplomacy, centred on the idea that John Foster Dulles was telling something of a porky when he claimed after the event:

the decisive factor that finally broke the protracted and frustrating stalemate in negotiations at Panmunjom was this: he [Eisenhower] deliberately conveyed word to the Communists, including the North Koreans, Chinese and Russians, through various secret channels that, if progress toward a settlement was not made, any past limits were off as to both targets and weapons, and that, if we saw fit, we would use the atomic bomb.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Thus we come back to the point of atomic diplomacy; the strategy unsuccessfully pursued by the Truman administration, and then supposedly brought to its successful conclusion by the Eisenhower administration in spring 1953. The latter idea has been peddled by Dulles, and while it remains unconvincing on the whole that the Chinese buckled under these threats, it is worth considering the genuine role such blustering played in bringing the KW to an end, especially once Stalin’s support for the Chinese in the face of these American bluffs vanished with the Soviet leader’s death.

With the death of Stalin and the sudden absence of his self-interested support, Mao seems to have decided to fall in line with the Indian proposals for peace. We noted before how in late March, after the aftershocks of Stalin’s death were felt, Beijing began signalling its willingness to talk seriously on the prospects for peace, as did Pyongyang. In late May, Dulles sent his provocative message through Indian PM Nehru to the effect that the US would up the ante in its nuclear program if peace was not soon reached. By that stage, of course, the Chinese had already decided to talk seriously about peace, safe in the knowledge that the disorganised Soviet leadership would no longer stand by them properly. The psychological force of the change in Soviet leadership was thus a critical reason for the onset of serious peace talks, yet the traditional explanation that Stalin’s death removed the final barrier to peace doesn’t fully explain what actually went down.

Stalin’s death was as important for what it facilitated – the so-called ‘peace offensives’ – as much as it was important for what the Soviet Union no longer supported – Chinese efforts to stand up Washington’s bluffs. It was for different reasons that Stalin’s death was critical to the advent of serious peace talks, but the Soviet leader’s death still played a pivotal role, and must be regarded as something of a watershed moment in the history of the KW, a conflict which, after all, Stalin had brought to life.

It is worth considering for a moment how empty the threats coming from Washington were. Certainly, Dulles’ claims were backed up with more practical and actual force than ever before, but they lacked the political will to ever be put into use. One historian noted perceptively that:

Since the National Security Council recommended in December [1951] that the United States adhere to the policy of avoiding a general war with China and the USSR and of seeking an acceptable settlement in Korea that would not jeopardize the U.S. position regarding Taiwan, a seat for Communist China in the United Nations, or vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, the chances that the war would be broadened in the near future appeared small.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Washington would be going against several grains if it attempted to make the limited war a total or even nuclear one in spring-summer 1953. This of course shouldn’t be news to us – the whole point of bluffing was to talk big so you didn’t have to fight big, and we have seen the sheer impact in its military capabilities that the previous years’ rearmament had on the US capacity to wage a large war. Washington was standing on solid military ground, even while Eisenhower knew that to wage a full-scale war with the Chinese at this time would result in an exodus of America’s allies, most notably the British, who had no interest in a war against a potential trading partner, whose trades they were sorely missing by spring 1953. As Eisenhower himself put it, should the limited war become larger, then ‘we would have to go it alone.’[[9]](#footnote-9)

It is safe to say then, as the majority of historians do, that the Eisenhower administration had no intentions of actually waging a proper war against the Chinese. They certainly seemed to hope that to bluster would be enough, and that because of the administration’s new status, an armistice would be that much more acceptable to the right-wing critics who believed the previous President had been soft on communism. The cloak of bluster was also a handy disguise which Dulles could later make use of; with a bit of work, he could present the blustering as *the* reason for the Chinese ‘capitulation’ at Panmunjom, when in reality the Chinese decision to treat had been made in light of Stalin’s death, and the willingness of Mao to accept the Indian proposals on the exchange of prisoners as the basis for negotiations. It is to the subject of the Indian proposals which we now turn our attention.

It was in April, after a length of absence, that the negotiators sat back down at Panmunjom to discuss terms. This willingness to treat once again had been facilitated by the Chinese agreement to a previous Indian proposal which had asked for sick and wounded prisoners to be exchanged. Beijing’s acceptance of this proposal, on 28th March 1953, represented the first in a series of steps that seemed to suggest the KW was approaching its conclusion. The Chinese acceptance of the exchange of the unfit prisoners was significant, but far more important was the simultaneous acceptance of another Indian proposal within a few days. In his article on the Indian role in the armistice of the KW, historian Robert Barnes emphasised the key moment of 30th March 1953 because of the Chinese recognition of something fundamentally problematic to the progress of peace talks up to that point: the status of communist prisoners who did not wish to return home.

This issue of the non-repatriates was to be dealt with, according to the Chinese concession, by their transportation to a neutral country for six months while representatives from their homeland were to try and persuade them to return home. If there remained non-repatriate prisoners at the end of this period, then their final disposition would be determined by the post-Armistice political conference on Korea. This proposal was unmistakably based on the Indian resolution made the previous autumn, and Nehru believed that here at last was a real opportunity to move forward with rival concessions, in a bid to achieve a proper peace.[[10]](#footnote-10) Over the subsequent weeks, in a hive of activity as the different delegations put forward their two cents in the UN GA, the Indian delegation sought to build upon its previous peacekeeping work, and eventually managed, following some American compromises throughout April 1953, to merge its proposal for peace with the proposal of the US. The final draft of the resolution calling for peace in Korea noted

With deep satisfaction that an agreement has been signed in Korea on the xchange of sick and wounded prisoners of war…that the exchange of sick and wounded prisoners of war will be speedily completed and that further negotiations at Panmunjom will result in achieving an early Armistice in Korea; and decided to recess the current session upon completion of the current agenda terms, and requests the President of the GA to reconvene the present session to resume consideration of the Korean question a) upon notification by the Unified Command to the SC of the signing of an armistice agreement in Korea or b) when, in the view of a majority of members, other developments in Korea require consideration of this question.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The key problem for both the Indian and American delegation was how to get the communists to pass such a resolution, particularly when communist policy would always be skewed in favour of disagreeing with the US or deliberately delaying proceedings when an American proposal came about. This was for reasons of suspicion of the American intentions as much as it was for reasons for propaganda, and Washington certainly followed the same natural policy of healthy suspicion to anything either Beijing or Moscow proposed. In this case though, signalling their willingness to humour those present, the Brazilian delegation agreed to present the draft as their own, freeing the communists from having to be seen to support an American backed resolution. This seemed to push the proposal further forward, and it was one of the few proposals in the history of the UN GA to receive approval from all the delegations in attendance. Everyone, it seemed, wished to see the KW come to an end.

There was, of course, still much work to be done, but over May 1953, with the Indian proposals for the prisoners issue accepted by all, it was becoming easier to move forward towards peace. The Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission was established that same month, tabled by Sweden, Switzerland, the Czechs and the Poles, with Indian leadership. The Commission was tasked with facilitating the delivery of prisoners back home, a central concern for Mao Zedong, since nearly half of the 170k plus prisoners did not seem to want to return to his socialist paradise. The Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission effectively created a halfway home, where the neutral states policed the handling of reluctant soldiers, and attempted to persuade them of the importance of returning where they had come from. This Commission, it has to be said, was a necessary foil to the bad taste left in the communist mouths back in summer 1951, when Truman had claimed that only communist soldiers who wanted to return home would be forced to do so. From this high-minded claim did every problem and suspicion regarding the prisoners flow, and this Commission in May 1953 was viewed as the best way to compromise over this torrid question.

While it may have been impolitic to send unwilling communists back to Mao, it was still more impolitic, as both sides discovered, to delay concluding the war over this particular question. Under the communist terms, the Commission was to hold onto the prisoners for a maximum of four months, whereupon, if no change of mind was recorded, that bridge would then be crossed. Initially, Eisenhower felt pressure to reject the communist terms, and to offer only 60 days before communist prisoners would be allowed to choose whether to actually go home or not. This of course was fundamentally unacceptable to the communists, as Eisenhower knew it would be, and within a few weeks the President bowed to the diplomatic pressure of his allies within the UN, rather than the pressure exerted by hardline armchair anti-communists at home in the US.

On the final march towards peace, the UN negotiators tabled a new proposal conceding that all non-repatriate prisoners be held in custody for 90 days. After another exhausting process, the final disposition of any remaining post-war political conference on Korea for a further 30 days. After this time the prisoners would either be released or handed over to the UN General Assembly. The Communists were allowed to choose. Having already proposed the four month detention period, it seemed as though the communist and UN positions were almost identical. In the context of our narrative on atomic diplomacy, this means that the prisoners issue resolved itself before the United States threatened nuclear attacks. Dulles’ claim that his atomic threats in late May, through Nehru and directed against the Chinese, thus suffer a further blow.

Yet it still took a further seven weeks before the fighting stopped, in large part due to South Syngman Rhee’s outrageous decision to release 27k prisoners, allowing them to escape into South Korean territory. Panic seemed to take over for a time during much of June, as it wasn’t certain whether Rhee had just derailed the peace talks or not. Mercifully for a war weary Washington though, the Chinese signalled their willingness to accept the allied explanation as to why these prisoners had been released. It of course suited the communist propaganda to note that Rhee was a loose cannon jeopardising the peace offensives for his own selfish reasons, but Rhee certainly had national security in mind when he opposed any armistice which would leave Kim’s regime in control of the North. Rhee feared, with good reason, that the KW would simply erupt again at a later date, and that even if it did not, SK would be forced to live in perpetual fear of its aggressive neighbour for the rest of the divided peninsula’s existence. Rhee’s bitter and aggressive attempts to torpedo the armistice didn’t last though, and after a few weeks, following revelations that he would left to face the communists alone if he did not yield, the aged president finally caved.

During this time Nehru became increasingly anxious and pressed for the UN General Assembly to discuss Korean developments. After all, several times in the past the conflict had seemed close to resolution, only for some unforeseen issue or insult to delay proceedings. By summer 1953 though, the situation was markedly different. There seemed no question in the communist camp to delay the outcome which their own initiatives had built towards. The Korean Armistice Agreement was finally signed on July 27, 1953. As we have seen in this episode, the necessary conditions to end the Korean War were established with Eisenhower's election and Stalin's death in the first half of 1953. But these developments alone were not sufficient to end the fighting, since a solution to the outstanding prisoners of war question still had to be agreed. The prisoners issue was the forgotten problem of the forgotten war, and was the fundamental reason why the conflict dragged on for as long as it did, long after the frontlines had stabilised and the public had grown tired of that theatre.

It was the Indian resolution on the prisoners issue, originally proposed by its delegation in autumn 1952 and then adapted in spring 1953 by the communists, that enabled the negotiations to move forward. It would thus not be hyperbole to state that the Indian resolution provided the essential means to end the Korean War, since its terms eventually proved acceptable to both sides, as it was borne out in the resumed Armistice negotiations. India did further facilitate the signing of the Armistice Agreement in the spring of 1953. Nehru, to his credit, showed great patience and foresight resisting the temptation to push for further UN action and instead placed his trust in the negotiators at Panmunjom. New Delhi then pressed both sides to move ever-closer to the Indian resolution, reprimanding Washington when it drifted from this course and criticizing Rhee's sabotage attempts. India must be given credit for nudging along the process toward peace.[[12]](#footnote-12)

So we’ve finally made it. The KW, launched by a scheming, ruthless and far-sighted Soviet leader on 25th June 1950, came to its end after so many weeks of terrifying offensives, so many months of dreary stalemate, and so many years of terrible, bitter warfare. While the exact reasoning for the final conclusion of the conflict will always be open for debate, and while its actors will always be contentious controversial figures, as will their claims, it has been our objective to shed light on this conflict and to bring it to its conclusion as only WDF can. Hopefully, you guys have enjoyed our coverage of this conflict over the last 47 episodes, but you should know that we are not finished yet. Please stay tuned for our final episode next time, as we wrap up the conflict and its disparate effects, lessons and results, as the US, the Far East and the rest of the world caught in the middle prepares for the next chapter of the CW. Until then though history friends, my name is Zack and this has been the penultimate episode of the KW. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. See Edward Friedman, ‘Nuclear Blackmail and the End of the Korean War’, *Modern China*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1975), pp. 75-91; pp. 76-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This argument taken from Roger Dingman, ‘Atomic Diplomacy’, pp. 79-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Ibid*, pp. 82-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Edward Friedman, ‘Nuclear Blackmail’, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Harold Hinton, *Communist China in World Politics* (Boston, 1966), p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cited in Edward Friedman, ‘Nuclear Blackmail’, p 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. W. Hermes, *United States Army in the Korean War: Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington, DC, 1966), pp. 130-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cited in Edward Friedman, ‘Nuclear Blackmail’, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Robert Barnes, ‘Between Two Blocs’, pp. 276-278. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This judgement is provided by Robert Barnes in *Ibid*, p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)