Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to the KW episode 24. Last time we brought our narrative up to the point where an American-sponsored resolution was about to be proposed to the UN SC. The date was 27th June 1950, in the afternoon in the UN HQ in New York, and the nine assembled nations of the SC awaited the message that the US delegate was about to present. If it was passed, then the Korean policy envisioned by the Truman administration in the spring would be able to proceed; if not, or if the Soviets turned up and made use of their veto, then the plan would be ruined.

In this episode we’ll open from the point of that decision in the UN, but we’ll also use this episode to establish the base for the subsequent resolutions adopted by the UNSC. By the end of this episode, you should have a good grasp not just of what the UN did through resolutions and through decisions made in its General Assembly debates, but you should also have a grasp of how its member states differed in several respects from the leading member, the US. It’s a story of high hopes, high diplomacy and high stakes, so I hope you’re ready. I will now take you to the UN SC in New York, in the afternoon of 27th June 1950…

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Britain, France, the ROC, Cuba, Norway, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Yugoslavia and the USA all stood on the precipice of history. Gathered together in a large room with its distinctive semi-circle table, were four of the five permanent members of the SC, since the Soviets were still absent, and six temporary members. The significance of the event was quite something; here were several nations, some of which didn’t even exist a decade before, gathering under the auspices of an institution which didn’t exist a decade before, to talk about what policy to adopt towards a county that didn’t exist a decade before. A whole lot had evidently changed in the preceding ten years. Many of those assembled were mindful of the anniversary, and for the French in particular, the date resembled a ten year anniversary of an event still painful to the national memory and psyche. The pall of appeasement, of the League of Nations, of the self-congratulatory do-nothing bureaucrats that had enabled such a terrible tragedy to take place without mounting sufficient opposition, hung in the air.

During the course of its troubled history, the League of Nations conducted not one single action of collective security. Its members were exposed as spineless when the Abyssinian Emperor pleaded for aid, and for the League to do its job. Its members had been shown to be disinterested when reports of Nazi Germany’s re-armament program had been learned of. Its members, ultimately, had been powerless to halt the very thing they had been established to prevent. The experiment in collective security and international cooperation had miserably failed, and yet the UN was one of the sure fruits of the SWW. From the ashes it emerged, with the renewed vigour provided by bitter memories and, critically, solid, enthusiastic, American support.

On 18th April 1946, in Geneva, Switzerland, a symbolic meeting was taking place – this was the final meeting of the League of Nations. Positioned as it had been in the neutral Swiss capital, the League had actually carried on most of its symbolic and associated organisations during the war. During the Tehran Conference in 1943, it was decided that the League would be replaced by a new, similar institution, which this time the US and Soviets would play active roles in. It was Robert Cecil, a British politician and diplomat who had been one of the most vocal supporters of the League and its principles when it had first been founded over a quarter of century before, who delivered the final, powerful speech in the League’s hall. Cecil said:

Let us boldly state that aggression wherever it occurs and however it may be defended, is an international crime, that it is the duty of every peace-loving state to resent it and employ whatever force is necessary to crush it, that the machinery of the Charter, no less than the machinery of the Covenant, is sufficient for this purpose if properly used, and that every well-disposed citizen of every state should be ready to undergo any sacrifice in order to maintain peace ... I venture to impress upon my hearers that the great work of peace is resting not only on the narrow interests of our own nations, but even more on those great principles of right and wrong which nations, like individuals, depend. The League is dead. Long live the United Nations.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As was the case with everything else in this era then, context was everything, and the nine assembled powers that took part in the UN SC debate on the 27th June 1950 knew full well that even while much had changed in a decade, the power of the aggressor, the danger of war and the capacity of man to assault his fellow man on the world stage had not. The Korean conflict was just another such failure in the world system, another example of the strong preying upon the weak, of the ambitious lusting for glory, of the beleaguered begging for aid.

The weight of this moment must have weighed heavily upon them, and the resolution adopted two days before, condemning the breaking of the peace by the North and the aggression, demonstrated that the UN SC would at least act, even if its actions had yet to bare any teeth. The resolution of 25th June hadn't merely encouraged the West and the South Koreans, it had also produced a knock on effect in the UN’s dealings towards the communists. With a clear example of communist violence being directed against a peaceable, if certainly flawed, regime, there was a serious dearth of good will in reserve for the likes of the PRC, which still attempted to angle for the ROC’s seat on the five-seat SC. Communism remained in the minds of many a monolithic movement, a tidal wave consuming all free democracies in a coordination strategy.

To many assembled in the UN, and indeed to many statesmen in Washington, London and Paris, it was inconceivable that the communist powers were not acting and pooling their resources together as one great and terrible nation. With regards to this idea, it would take some time before the true extent of Sino-Soviet difference became clear, and before the PR and the USSR were seen as separate issues. This attitude towards communism was used by some historians to explain why the US believed that the Chinese would not intervene in the war later on in the year. The rationale went that since the Soviets were evidently showing signs of pulling back and moderating their tone, the Chinese would never act independently of Moscow. The rude awakening to the reality demonstrated that to figures like Mao Zedong, communism could be as nationalistic as he wanted it to be; all that truly mattered was the power behind the actions that were made.

The resolution was American-sponsored, and was designed to elicit a commitment from those present, even while a contribution of soldiers was not promised from each member state. The wording of the resolution – to repel the attack, and to restore international peace and security – did not echo the policy Washington would later take, or the one which Truman knew he would have to take in time. For the moment though, the impermeability of the fog of war obscured what the NKPA had planned. Would they surge down the peninsula, or would they hold onto Seoul and walk away with the money, as it were? The Truman administration couldn’t be sure, but they could be sure that an armed intervention, or a declaration to the effect that they intended on doing so, would alienate portions of the UN, and likely prevent the kind of united front that the Americans were expecting.

Of course, since such an event is over 65 years old and we know what took place after, the US resolution was destined to pass, by a vote of seven to one – Yugoslavia voted against the resolution, while Egypt and India voted to abstain. The resolution thus passed, the Truman administration had set their foundations in place, since the resolution had called for ‘members of the UN to render furnish every assistance to the ROK as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Passing such a resolution suited Truman under the circumstances, but trouble was on the horizon. Having used George Kennan to persuade America’s allies in the hours before the vote that all the US wanted was to restore peace, with no mention of any large scale operations in Korea that would push beyond the 38th parallel, Truman knew that, fairly soon, the US would have to go back on this commitment.

It would be then that the American ambassador to the UN would argue that the only true way to ‘restore international peace and security in the area’, as the resolution had described, was to invade NK proper and remove the threat which Kim Il-Sung posed to peace. Almost as soon as the circumstances of the war, and of the North Korean push past the River Han in particular, was discovered, the next phase of the American policy towards Korea was developed. In future episodes, we shall see that as early as mid-July, Truman and Dean Acheson were already working for a way to get around the wording of the resolution they had adopted, with the aim of creating an internationally supplied military force. As the story of Korea tells us, the administration were successful in this regard, but it remains to ask that important question about the American proposals to the UN, which are largely glossed over in the traditional telling of the Korean story. If Washington had its plan, and if Truman appreciated what America needed for the desired military circumstances to take place, then why did she act alongside the UN SC at all? Why didn’t she simply act, as she had done by moving the 7th fleet to anchor at Taiwan, unilaterally in Asia?

The historical consensus states that the UN granted the US additional legitimacy, as well as the moral high ground, and this is certainly true, judging by the way in which the war is viewed today.[[3]](#footnote-3) To fully answer this question though, we must remember first and foremost the history of the divided Korean peninsula at this point, and of the presence of several UN personnel in the ROK. We’ll recall that the UN COK had been working since December 1948 to facilitate the withdrawal of soldiers from the Soviet and American spheres, and to build a cooperation process that would make unification under democratic auspices easier. Of course, neither the Soviets nor Kim Il-Sung wanted to see unification in the terms that the UN was selling, and they refused to permit the entry of the UN personnel into the northern portion of the peninsula.

Thus rebuffed, the UNCOK focused instead on making the South a better place to be, and in reinforcing the security of Rhee’s regime. In 1949 the UNCOK was given additional responsibilities to guard against the threats to the South posed by the North along the 38th parallel. This border had been far more volatile than was perhaps expected, and a permanent contingent of UN personnel was actually stationed along the 38th. Indeed, shortly before the actual invasion by the North, the UN ‘quietly expanded its observation teams’ along this border, enabling the UN to receive reports of the situation on the ground, and not have to rely on the US for such intel.

To jump ahead with the narrative somewhat, in October 1950, the UN would establish the UN Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea, or UNCURK. The responsibilities of this organisation was to engage in relief and reconstruction programs in the country, as per the guidelines of the UN’s General Assembly, and the recommendations of the Economic and Social Council of the UN. Two months later, the UN GA established another organ to get the job done, the UN Korean Reconstruction Agency, or UNKRA to help exclusively with the problem of rebuilding the Korean economy. UNKRA was to be the economic arm of UNCURK, and it was supposed to liaise with the so-called Agent General, in other words the military commander of UN forces, to facilitate the establishment of a unified, independent and democratic government in Korea.

Since everyone was going Korea crazy in the UN by this point, the General Assembly set up a further five organisations to watch over and control the UNCURK, but in addition to the economic, infrastructural and political aid, the UN also established a patter which it maintains to this day – the provision of aid to the actual civilians caught in the crossfire. The UN SC established an emergency program for civilian relief to be operated through the UN command in July 1950, ending in September 1953 after the KW. Throughout this period, the US would contribute over $400 million to this relief program, and $100 million to the UNKRA; other UN member states contributed about $50 million each to the two programs, which were aimed at rebuilding the Korean country as much as the Korean people.[[4]](#footnote-4) These were clearly huge sums of money, and the effort is often forgotten amidst the more ‘interesting’ aspects of the war, but it is at least refreshing to denote that the people were not glossed over. Since the biggest losers from the KW were the Korean people themselves, with as many as 3 million estimated to have been casualties, the efforts of the UN and US make for especially good news.

Of course the cynic would say this aid was all well and good, but did the aid actually help the Koreans, and produce the desired results? Not so, according to the historian Chi Young Pak in his book *Korea and the UN*, wherein the author notes:

Both programs, adopted at the initiative of the US, were not successful due to two main problems: the lack of agreement on objectives, priorities and methods, and the dominance of military considerations on reconstruction policies. The creation of all these organs and programs is indicative of the extent of the UN’s involvement in the KW.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The UN did its best to cope with an unprecedented situation, and its GA would play an important role in mediating a peace between the different sides. The UN SC would also furnish several resolutions over the course of the initial few months of the war, as the military and strategic situation on the peninsula changed, and the UN SC members were forced to deal with fresh challenges, such as the suspicion of their home governments to the idea of intervention, and the return of the Soviets to the SC in early August. For the sake of our narrative, it will be helpful in this episode to examine the major resolutions put forward by the UN SC during the course of the war. This will mean we jump ahead in our story, but it will serve us as a base from which to return to in later episodes. By revealing these resolutions now, the bigger picture, I believe, will also become clearer, so let’s begin.

We saw in the last episode how hesitant the Truman administration was to act decisively in Korea so long as a fog of war existed, and the NKPA’s advance was uncertain. Yet, by 30th June, it was clear that events were proceeding apace, and that the assault across the Han River by the North had been largely successful. It was on the 30th June, three days after the UN resolution calling for the UN to render every assistance to the defence of SK, that General MacArthur’s legions marched. The US 8th Army, conducting its occupation and peacekeeping mission in post-war Japan, was shipped across the sea to the beleaguered peninsula to the eager relief of the General. MacArthur was named Supreme Allied Commander, and the 8th Army of American soldiers was now given a badge of legitimacy, by adopting a UN banner, and claiming it operated in that institution’s name. In his book on the KW, historian Robert Barnes made the following astute observation in MacArthur’s timely arrival on 30th June 1950, saying:

Bolstered by his sense of both destiny and racial superiority, MacArthur was confident that the North Koreans would be easily defeated. But over the following weeks the UN forces in Korea were overwhelmed and pushed back. The 8th Army’s ineffectiveness was the result of post-1945 cuts in the military budget which had produced and understrength, poorly equipped, trained and officered force. After nearly five years of occupation duties in Japan, these American soldiers were also ill-prepared for combat.[[6]](#footnote-6)

MacArthur’s eagerness, his shocking initial failures – shocking to him at least – and the helter-skelter retreat down the peninsula are issues we’ll address in the next episode, but for now it suffices to say that this US failure formed a critical part of the UN experience. On 7th July the UN command was established, and the military arm through which all subsequent UN actions would be conducted was thus in place.[[7]](#footnote-7) As July progressed, the demonstrated failure of so small a UN contribution made it plain that greater contributions would have to be made if SK was to be saved. On 17th July then, an important milestone was established, as the UN forces were placed firmly under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander, Douglas MacArthur. This centralising of command under the Americans was met with some irritation, but Washington reasoned that since it was footing most of the bills in Korea and providing the most troops, such control over command was only right. Most objections raised were lobbed not necessarily at the US command per se, but at the US commander in the region, MacArthur. As it transpired, the suspicions that the old war horse would march ahead of his orders, and prove something of a liability to the war’s course, proved to be well-founded.

Indeed, the consequences of placing UN forces under a single command structure, but with few actual guidelines or plans for the future, were felt in early October. In the midst of what seemed like a military collapse in the NKPA, there was a real sense of positivity in the air, or at least in MacArthur’s mind. It was now that the meagre goals of merely pushing up to the 38th parallel began to seem inadequate – MacArthur wanted more, since only with a push into NK and by eliminating Kim Il-Sung’s regime could the peninsula truly be free. As the American ambassador to the UN put it, ‘shall only a portion of this country be assured this freedom? I think not!’ Indeed, as the historian Paul M. Edwards wrote, objections to advancing beyond the 38th were becoming lost in the rapid pace of advancement, and the perceived doom that the Northern regime now faced. Edwards noted:

The move should not have come as a surprise to anyone. When asked about crossing the 38th, Truman had told a press conference earlier that the question was still open for discussion and on 17th July he had asked the NSC to prepare a recommendation for the possibility of crossing the border and destroying the NKA. All during this discussion the British and the Indians opposed any movement into NK, but they acknowledged that the military momentum in Korea was quickly outstripping their political activity to prevent it.[[8]](#footnote-8)

You’ll recall from earlier on that we noted how Truman planned to find a workaround to initial pledge not to advance past the 38th parallel in mid-July – and here the plan began to take shape. While Paul Edwards, unlike Richard Thornton, doesn’t attempt to speculate on the true reasons why Truman might have wanted such an advance to go ahead, he does note the passage of the Offensive Across the 38th Parallel resolution on 7th October 1950. A significant fact about this resolution was that it was passed not in the SC, where the Soviets were up to their stalling ways, but in the GA. The distinction is important, because resolutions in the GA were not legally binding as those in the SC were supposed to be. Although they thus granted Washington the moral legitimacy, the Soviets could claim that they held no legal basis, to which the US would retort that according to their interpretation of the 27th June resolution calling for the defence of the ‘area’, the multinational force was well within its rights. UN resolutions which followed this one reflected the immediate pace of developments on the ground, so for example on 10th November, the resolution proposed was created in response to the evidence that the PRC was getting involved. This spooked several members of the UN SC who hadn't been especially thrilled about advancing beyond the 38th to begin with, and one in particular, the British, proposed that a Demilitarised Zone be established just before the Yalu River, to prevent the Chinese intervention from becoming a full-blown war.

The proposal stipulated that the North Koreans lay down their arms and that a UN commission be established to restore order and peace to the region, consulting also with the Chinese. Both the British, French and Italians were in favour of this proposal, which would pull the UN force back from what appeared to be the precipice of war with China. Revealingly, the secretary of state Dean Acheson asked for the resolution to be delayed for a few weeks while the situation on the ground could be better assessed. Acheson, if it wasn’t obvious yet, was playing procrastination 101 by November 1950, as he tried to juggle the objections of America’s allies with the unofficial policy of Washington as set down in NSC 68. A UN commission would prevent the escalation of the conflict and would thereby offset the need for great budgetary increases. November was a particularly trying month for the allies, as nerves were at their most frayed with the appearance of the Chinese ‘volunteers’. Acheson even felt the need to state for the record, the following reassuring message:

***Audio clip of Acheson saying they didn’t want empire in Korea.***

Predictably, General MacArthur was peeved at the very notion of treating with the Chinese, and balked at the back channel approach taken by London, when the British attempted to deal with Mao through an alternative route, but received no response. MacArthur, well placed as always to make a judgment about someone else’s morale fibre, evoked the incendiary image of appeasement once more, saying that giving China a strip of NK was akin to giving the Nazis that Sudetenland, adding that ‘indeed, to yield to so immoral a proposition would bankrupt our leadership and influence in Asia and render untenable our position both politically and militarily.’[[9]](#footnote-9) So the offensive would not be stopped, but by 13th November the US was proposing its own resolution, and this time it was the other allied nations’ turn to veto it. President Truman, Acheson, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and several other figures in Washington latched onto the idea of bombing targets on the Manchurian side of the Yalu River – in other words, of taking the fight to the Chinese, and bursting through the veil of the ‘volunteer force’ that Mao concocted to prevent him having to make an actual declaration of war.

On the surface, Washington claimed that it wasn’t looking for approval for this resolution per se, merely a reaction from its allies. A reaction was what it got, as the idea was unilaterally condemned. If this had been part of the strategy to escalate the war as per NSC 68, then for the moment at least, such a strategy had failed. A diplomatic counterattack was then launched in the UN, as on 14th December 1950, a resolution calling for the establishment of a cease-fire planning group was proposed. On 1st February 1951, a resolution calling for a condemnation of the PRC as the aggressor in the conflict was tabled. The Truman administration declared its desire to have such a resolution on record, and explained that it was essential for the sake of the UN’s stability, and for the sake of clarification in the home governments. Yet, by spring 1951, with the Chinese being pushed back, the immediate anxiety evoked by the war had greatly lessened, and the UN was splitting into additional opinion groups. The British, above all, were beginning to sympathise and identify more with the Indians than the Americans, and were calling for ways to neutralise the conflict, rather than escalate it.

Initially, the attempt to brand China as the aggressor seemed to fail, but the US returned with a compromise that stated General MacArthur, by now perceived by many members states in the UN as a loose cannon, would be given no more authority to advance until significant peace overtures were forwarded to the Chinese. This assurance seemed to do the trick, and through this diplomatic manoeuvre, by the US leveraged its condemnation of the PRC through the UN. According to the UN, Mao Zedong was now the aggressor in the Korean War – the Chinese Chairman was outraged. Mao was not the only one – this American resolution and the actions which followed it stuck in the craw of many a US ally, including the British, Indians, French and Canadians. By May 1951, it was apparent that a stalemate of sorts was underway on the peninsula, and yet it seemed to outside observers that Washington wished to fan the flames by asking for increased trade embargos and restrictions against Mao’s regime in retaliation, it was said, for the Chinese aggression.

This resolution went ahead on 7th May, but by this point it was becoming likely that the US would have to work a great deal harder for such a victory again. The goodwill present in the institution in the previous year had mostly been exhausted, and the member states wanted a negotiated end to the war, not more incendiary statements that could only exacerbate the tensions. The American leadership in the sanctioning and – as it appeared to many members – deliberate poking of the Chinese bear, could only result in disaster. The early Chinese warning that any efforts to paint it as the aggressor would prevent any negotiated peace had been ignored, but issues were reaching an impasse in the political halls as much as along the battlefield.

By summer 1951 then, as the war degenerated into the kind of tit-for-tat stalemate it would become for the next two years, there was much food for thought among the allied nations. A striking aspect of the American policies in particular was the constant need to check what the Americans were proposing, and to issue recommendations that would separate the Korean issue from the Chinese one. The Canadians in particular voiced their increasingly irritant objections to Washington’s tendency to lump the Korean and Chinese issues together as one, and to the references to US actions rather than UN ones. As the historian David Stairs noted in his article on the UN and Korea, representations to the US to clarify the issue may have been unsuccessful, but allied pressure had another interesting consequence, as Stairs wrote: ‘allied pressure on the United States to separate clearly the Chinese and Korean issues persisted throughout the hostilities, and from the start it compelled the Americans to distinguish their Taiwan policy from their posture on Korea.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

‘What Taiwan policy’, you may reasonably ask, since all the US had done by late June was move their 7th fleet to anchor on the coast of Taiwan – what was so bad about that? Well, from the beginning, Washington had pursued a policy on Taiwan that was evidently independent of the UN, even if they didn’t always seek to clarify this fact, and the UN didn’t want to be associated with the Taiwan issue, since it was recognised as such a sore subject for the PR. Again though, being associated with Washington’s Taiwan policy wouldn’t have been *that* big a deal had it been confined merely to keeping a fleet on Taiwan’s shores. Predictably enough then, considering the US end goal by this point, merely having their fleet sit outside Taiwan wasn’t all that the US chose to do.

For several reasons, General MacArthur was sent to Taiwan in late July 1950 to confer with the Chinese republicans, no doubt sending a shiver of rage down Mao Zedong’s spine in the process. The Americans plainly were determined to stick their nose in the business of the PR, but the UN did not want Mao to have any illusions about where they stood on the matter, especially since in it wouldn’t be until October 1950 at the earliest that the Chinese would begin making their presence felt in Korea. It made no sense, in the minds of many of America’s allies, to provoke the Chinese by arriving in Taiwan and conversing with Mao’s mortal enemy. The reasons why Washington chose to do will be examined in the next episode.

In this episode we’ve touched on the UN; the resolutions it proposed, the structures it set in place including the UN command above all, and the tensions created by the progress of the war as the aims and enthusiasms of the member states changed. Something which should be quite evident even from this overview is the distinction between what the Americans wanted and what their UN allies wanted, especially after the initial emergency passed and the Chinese were slowly pushed back. American determination to force and aggravate the issue contributes, in my mind, to the thesis of this series: that the Truman administration wanted to escalate the conflict, so that its defence budget would have an excuse to stretch alongside the expanding war operations. It wasn’t until later on in 1951 that, having acquired the funds they desired, American leaders rolled back the forceful policy, and became more focused on peace. We are by no means finished with the UN, but hopefully this very chunky and involved episode here has given you guys a base to better understand the course of the conflict and the interests of the UN therein.

Next time, we’ll engage in another of these base-setting exercises, when we set forth the course of the war through 1950, and spend some time examining the role that the likes of Douglas MacArthur, the UN and others had to play in its operations. Was MacArthur, as some would later claim, an aggravating force in the quest to contain the KW, or was MacArthur, like so many others, merely an actor in a play which the Truman administration was attempting to control? We’ll find out next time, but for now, my name is Zack, and this has been episode 24 of the KW. Thanks for listening and I’ll be seeing you all soon.

1. Cited in George Scott, *The Rise and Fall of the League of Nations* (London, 1973), p. 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in Richard C. Thornton, *Odd Man Out*, p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* (Kentucky, 2015), pp. 149-151. This is a specific example, but the vast majority of sources note the moral leadership that the US acquired by deferring to the UN Security Council. In an atmosphere of failed hopes following the collapse of the League of Nations, the members of the UNSC were especially sensitive to the suggestion that their new institution held no teeth, and so it was important for many members that it acted this time around, as we’ll see in future episodes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Figures and narrative provided by Chi Young Pak, *Korea and the United Nations* (London, 2000), pp. 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, pp. 8-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Barnes, *The US, the UN and the Korean War: Communism in the Far East and the American Struggle for Hegemony in America's Cold War* (London, 2014), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dennis Stairs, ‘The United Nations and the Politics of the Korean War’, *International Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Spring, 1970), pp. 302-320; p. 309. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Paul M. Edwards, *United Nations Participants in the Korean War: The Contributions of 45 Member Countries* (London, 2013), pp. 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cited in *Ibid*, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dennis Stairs, ‘The United Nations and the Politics of the Korean War’, p. 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)