Echoes of War
Deciphering Chinese Military Strategy through the Lens of US Intelligence History

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Abstract

This article delves into the impact of Chinese military strategy during the Korean War and its interplay with US intelligence at the time. It posits that intelligence analysts must grasp Chinese military strategy as a cornerstone of their training to enhance their effectiveness in estimative, current, and warning intelligence for operational gains. Drawing from an array of authoritative primary and secondary sources, it seeks to illuminate instructive insights through a juxtaposition of Chinese strategic maneuvers and US intelligence efficacy. By joining select multiservice and multiagency experiences, this article propels the performance of the US intelligence community today, offering a yardstick to gauge contemporary advancements. Intelligence analysts and operational planning teams markedly enhance their achievements by drawing from historical precedents to decipher Chinese intentions and capabilities. Embracing this paradigm equips military operations to adeptly tackle the realistic tactical, operational, and strategic challenges confronting US forces.

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From 25 June 1950 to 27 July 1953, South Korea and the United Nations (UN) waged the Korean War against the unprovoked aggression of North Korea, backed by China and the Soviet Union. Initially, the comparatively weaker South, with 65,000 combat troops, yielded to the quantitatively and qualitatively superior North, boasting 135,000 combat troops.¹ The early stages witnessed North Korea drive South Korean forces perilously close to the ocean near Pusan in the south. To reverse this initial onslaught, the UN intervened in August, pushing North Korean forces back to the Yalu River on the Chinese border. However, UN forces encountered a formidable challenge with the commencement of five Chinese military campaigns in October 1950, compelling them southward near the 38th parallel. The subsequent two years of conflict resulted in a protracted stalemate, culminating in the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement by the United States, North Korea, and China. While

¹ Roy Appleman, South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu (Washington: Center of Military History, 1961), https://history.army.mil/.
this accord brought about a semblance of peace to the peninsula, it set the stage for what remains officially the longest-running war in modern history.

Presently, circumstances pertaining to peaceful reunification on the peninsula arguably stand at their most precarious juncture. Kim Jong-un, the unchallenged leader of the world’s most profoundly totalitarian state, has officially inaugurated a new approach toward North–South unification policy. This approach views South Korea merely as another adversarial state lacking exceptional ties to the North, declaring that “we should no longer make to regard the clan [South Korea] . . . as the partner of reconciliation and reunification,” according to the official newspaper of the Central Workers Party of Korea. Concurrently, the frequency and intensity of missile tests escalates, enhancing North Korea’s military capabilities, while diplomatic normalization serves as a smokescreen for potential surprise provocations.

Against a backdrop of geopolitical distractions such as the focus on Israel and Ukraine within the UN, North Korea may perceive an opportunity to leverage military actions to extract concessions on sanctions. Moreover, proponents of the prevailing international order must contemplate the prospect of China, bound by a defense treaty with North Korea, seizing an opportunity to collaborate in a Taiwan contingency, aligned with their respective objectives.

This piece endeavors to illuminate the Chinese Communist Party’s involvement in the Korean War, its enduring impact on contemporary international relations, and offers a comprehensive assessment of US intelligence efforts during that era to extract insights applicable to modern intelligence operations. Ultimately, intelligence analysts must grasp the essentials of Chinese military strategy to enhance their proficiency in estimative, current, and warning intelligence.

The onset of the war was instigated by North Korea under the leadership of Kim Il-sung, who sought to assert control over the Korean peninsula through coercive means, deeming the political landscape unfavorable for unification via subversive tactics. Orchestrated by the North, Communist party adherents in South Korea initiated an armed insurrection between 1948 and 1949 in a bid to thwart the establishment of a stable, autonomous government beyond northern influence. However, this endeavor faltered following concerted efforts to undermine Communist propaganda and a robust counterguerrilla campaign by South Korean forces, which disrupted insurgent supply lines, sustenance, and refuge.

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The developments effectively quashed subversive endeavors to alter the internal dynamics of South Korean politics, prompting North Korea to seek assistance from the Soviet Union and China. While Kim Il-sung played a pivotal role in strategic decision-making concerning Communist forces on the peninsula, heavy reliance on Soviet and Chinese leaders both militarily and ideologically significantly influenced future actions.

Following the green light for invasion, Kim intensified preparations for war. Employing meticulous operational security measures, the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) launched a surprise invasion on 25 June 1950, catching the South off guard. However, initial success proved fleeting, as their strategy to swiftly overpower the South Korean military before potential US intervention failed to materialize. Following a thorough examination of the first six months of war in December 1950, North Korean military strategists concluded that Soviet mechanization doctrine, upon which they had modeled their tactics, was ill-suited for their predominantly infantry-centric configuration. Presently, we observe a more cohesive and integrated strategy under a refined military doctrine.

Soviet Union involvement, under the leadership of Josef Stalin, primarily revolved around logistical support and training, although there were some instances of direct engagement with US forces in the aerial theater. Initially, the Soviets rebuffed Kim Il-sung’s entreaties for backing an invasion without explicit endorsement from China. However, upon confirmation of Chinese support through troop reinforcements, Soviet aid in terms of supplies and military personnel was mobilized to facilitate necessary preparations. Soviet military advisors traveled to Pyongyang to assist in formulating initial invasion plans.

MiG fighter jets were deployed to Andong airbase in China, situated just beyond the Yalu River, where they played a crucial role in training Chinese pilots and safeguarding Communist logistics against potential US aerial assaults. In the defense of these vital installations, Soviet pilots bore the brunt of aerial engagements in the infamous “MiG Alley,” located southwest of Andong airbase. The death of Stalin in March 1953 marked the end of the original, albeit limited, support provided by the Soviet Union to its allies.

Regarding the Chinese, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, their involvement was driven by a multitude of factors. Foremost among these was the imperative to defend territorial integrity against perceived imperialist threats, particularly given the proximity of their Manchurian border. The historical precedent of Japanese military incursions launched from the Korean peninsula underscored the strategic

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importance of controlling this pivotal landmass as a buffer against potential aggressors.

In addition to these overt geopolitical considerations, China’s decision to enter the conflict was motivated by less apparent yet equally compelling factors. The Communist Party leadership harbored aspirations for bolstering national esteem, enhancing international standing, and fulfilling social obligations to assert its position among the foremost Socialist states. Moreover, Mao sought to consolidate CCP authority over the domestic populace by rallying them against an external adversary, a tactic previously employed with success during the Japanese occupation just five years prior. Furthermore, China’s narrative of reclaiming its historical status as Asia’s “Middle Kingdom” also factored into its decision to engage in war. Considering these multifaceted motivations, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership tasked Commander Peng Duhai with devising a military strategy aimed at realizing its broader political objectives.

**Chinese Ends**

The evolution of battlefield dynamics across three years and two distinct phases of conflict profoundly influenced Chinese strategy. The Chinese chose a strategy of annihilation in the first phase, which saw UN forces swiftly pushed southward from the Yalu, crossing the 38th parallel in a mere month.\(^5\) Despite deploying a quarter million troops in this campaign to halt the UN advance, Chinese forces achieved only moderate success in their first three offensives. Concurrently, they struggled with weak rear-area defense, stretched logistical supply lines, and suffered significant casualties, estimated at around 110,000.

The fourth and fifth offensives marked a stark departure, proving futile as the Chinese failed to drive the UN forces further south or mount effective counterattacks, resulting in the loss of an additional 185,000 troops. This heralded the onset of the two-year second phase of the conflict, during which the Chinese shifted to a strategy of attrition, aimed at accumulating strength for future massed assaults. However, UN victories that pushed Chinese forces northward effectively dashed these ambitions. Compounding factors such as economic stagnation, marginal gains on the battlefield, and the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953, provided China with the political maneuverability to extricate itself from the conflict.

Chinese Ways

The prevailing doctrine at the time, which had proven efficacious for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) during the Chinese Civil War, was conceptually referred to as people’s war. Characterized by its asymmetric nature, people’s war emphasized leveraging supremely advantageous disparities in manpower ratios to offset the technological and material superiority of an adversary.6 Central to this doctrine were the core principles of employing infantry forces and mobility, which included: initiating the offensive, capitalizing on surprise, dispersing during defensive maneuvers, employing deception, minimizing logistical dependence through self-sufficiency, and inflicting attrition on the adversary by mobilizing the surrounding populace.

Of particular significance was the deceptive tactic of enticing the enemy deep into one’s territory, effectively trading land for time, as this provided fertile ground for the application of people’s war principles. Although the interpretation of this doctrine has evolved over time, it persisted in its fundamental form until the mid-1980s.

Chinese Means

To achieve its military objectives, the Chinese augmented their initial force of 250,000 troops to 700,000 by August 1950, albeit with a relatively limited presence of artillery, mechanized units, or aircraft for direct support. Each Corps of troops at the outset of the conflict comprised four armies, three artillery divisions, and three air-defense corps, predominantly nonmotorized and encountering challenges in maneuvering against the more mobile UN forces.7 Chinese troops relied heavily on what they could carry, granting them mobility and elusiveness on the battlefield. Artillery assets were scarce, with only one supporting division, while tank regiments, comprising roughly 90 tanks each, numbered a mere five, maintaining this structure throughout the war with fluctuations in troop numbers dictated by attrition rates.

Initially, the air forces were modest, with approximately 80–100 fighters, until the arrival of 124 MiG-15s from the Soviet Union nearly a year into the conflict. However, the Chinese initially faced setbacks as Stalin withheld promised air support during offensive campaigns, opting to preserve his nation’s aircraft for the defense of Manchuria.

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7 Liegl, China’s Use of Military Force in Foreign Affairs.
Chinese Legacy of the Korean War

Chinese political objectives were partially achieved, enabling the CCP to enhance its standing as a leader within the burgeoning Socialist sphere by effectively confronting imperialist forces and supporting fellow Socialist allies. Additionally, the CCP consolidated its authority over China by fostering a common external adversary, a tactic still employed today to galvanize nationalist sentiment in alignment with its agenda. Furthermore, the pursuit of nuclear armament assumed heightened urgency in the aftermath of the war. Mao’s apprehensions regarding the Soviet Union and the specter of nuclear threats from the United States catalyzed a shift toward nuclear deterrence as a supplement to conventional forces. Leveraging apprehensions surrounding this strategic asymmetry, the CCP embarked on a trajectory that culminated in the testing of its inaugural nuclear bomb eleven years postwar, alongside the development of indigenous satellite technology and the production of ballistic missiles.

The CCP’s failure to expel Western forces from the Korean peninsula has left lasting repercussions, shaping dynamics that persist to this day. Beijing must now grapple with the fact that North Korea’s actions have strengthened the relationship between its major rivals, South Korea and Japan. This was evidenced by their first-ever stand-alone summit in 2023, which is detrimental to China’s interests.

Chinese support for North Korea inadvertently justifies the continued presence of US troops on the peninsula—a reality that contrasts with previous US attempts to withdraw before the onset of the Cold War. Ironically, China perceives regional tensions as stemming from the presence of US forces in South Korea, viewing them as an “existential threat” to their de facto buffer zone in North Korea and hindrance to the peninsula’s ultimate reunification under a regime amenable to China.

Adding to global concerns is the unresolved tension surrounding Taiwan. Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s omission of Korea and Taiwan from the post–World War II US defense perimeter in his 1950 Press Club speech presented a perceived opportunity for Beijing to advance China’s aim of incorporating Taiwan under CCP control. Mao’s endorsement of a North Korean offensive had ripple effects, prompting the Truman administration to dispatch forces to safeguard Taiwan.

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effectively thwarting a potential Chinese military resolution to the Taiwan issue.\textsuperscript{11} While Mao is not publicly blamed within China for the loss of Taiwan to the Nationalists, a compelling argument posits that his strategic decision to support North Korea precluded Taiwan’s unification with the mainland.

**UN Intelligence During the Korean War**

The Korean War yielded three pivotal themes from which intelligence analysts can extract valuable insights for future intelligence operations: strategic surprise, signals intelligence (SIGINT), and human intelligence (HUMINT).

**Strategic Surprise**

The first theme, perhaps the most enduringly etched in memory, revolves around the failure of the US defense apparatus to anticipate not one, but two surprise invasions on the Korean peninsula. Much discourse has scrutinized the causes behind this lapse, ranging from strategic leaders dismissing intelligence too readily to the absence of definitive and actionable intelligence. However, the reality is far more intricate, likely stemming from a confluence of factors spanning the tactical, operational, and strategic echelons of warfare. Here, we shall focus on key evidentiary elements furnished by the intelligence community to senior leadership both in Washington and the Korean Theater of Operations (KTO).

The intelligence gathered, in terms of both quality and quantity, provided sufficient grounds for analysts to forewarn senior political and military figures. The array of information sources encompassed espionage, photo reconnaissance, communications intelligence (COMINT), captured and translated enemy document exploitation (DOMEX), prisoner interrogations, open-source broadcasts, newspapers, indigenous populations, Westerners residing on the Chinese mainland, military attaché and consular reports from Taiwan and Hong Kong, nationalist factions, and intelligence agencies affiliated with the UN coalition.\textsuperscript{12} Notably absent were high-altitude imagery sources, as both the U-2 and CORONA satellite initiatives took flight only in 1956 and 1959, respectively.\textsuperscript{13}

These diverse sources underpinned the analytical process for daily intelligence briefs as well as national intelligence assessments, supported by civilian and military

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intelligence entities. A daily intelligence report from 3 October 1950, referenced a document from the United Kingdom Foreign Office revealing that Chinese Communist Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai had informed the Indian ambassador in Peiping (now Beijing) of Chinese intentions to intervene across the Yalu River to defend North Korea.\footnote{Erin E. Thompson, “China Threatens Intervention in Korean War (3 OCT 1950),” \\emph{This Week in MI History}, 2 October 2023, https://www.dvidshub.net/} This assertion found further corroboration in a report three days later, on 6 October, when the Indian prime minister, acting as a conduit between Communist and American interests, expressed apprehensions regarding the inevitable onset of war based on his assessment of the prevailing situation.\footnote{Robert Barnes, “Between the Blocs: India, the United Nations, and Ending the Korean War,” \\emph{Journal of Korean Studies} 18, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 263–86, https://muse.jhu.edu/}

The culmination of gathered intelligence subsequently informed significant publications aimed at both theater and national audiences, most notably the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). A comprehensive review of NIEs spanning from 8 September 1950 to 24 November 1950, reveals a prevailing conviction among intelligence analysts that Communist Chinese forces possessed the requisite capability to effectively impede the advancement of UN forces toward the Yalu River, potentially even compelling their retreat to defensive positions farther south. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) underscored this assessment, estimating that 30–40 thousand “Manchurian volunteers” were already deployed in North Korea, with hundreds of thousands more stationed just over the Chinese border.\footnote{Jonathan Corrado, “Rethinking Intelligence Failure: China’s Intervention in the Korean War,” \\emph{International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence} 36, no. 1 (2023): 199–219, https://doi.org/}

However, what remained elusive to the CIA was a definitive understanding of the Communist intentions behind deploying these forces. Analysts conjectured that the Chinese were disinclined to instigate a global conflict by directly attacking UN forces, instead preferring to clandestinely bolster North Korean capabilities through the deployment of sizable “volunteer” contingents. This analytical perspective was further substantiated by key assumptions regarding Chinese reluctance to seize multiple previous strategic opportunities to deploy troops at pivotal junctures when North Korean forces were at their zenith, notably during the defense of Busan, the UN amphibious landing at Inchon, and the subsequent crossing of the 38th Parallel by UN forces.

More specifically, an NIE on 12 October 1950 laid out the rationales both for and against potential intervention. Addressed to Pres. Harry Truman, this document indicated consensus among the CIA, Air Force, Navy, Army, and Department of State regarding the Chinese capacity for intervention, yet hesitancy prevailed.

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regarding the likelihood of a full-scale incursion into Korea. The arguments in favor of intervention encompassed various strategic considerations: bolstering Communist China’s prestige, enhancing its standing among global Communist adherents, eliminating a Western-style democracy on its borders, safeguarding sources of electrical power for the Manchurian region, deflecting blame onto Western powers for domestic economic challenges, and countering perceived ideological setbacks should Western forces prevail in Korea. Conversely, arguments against intervention included concerns over domestic stability and economic vulnerabilities that could precipitate the downfall of the Communist regime, diminishing prospects for Chinese accession to the UN, reliance on Soviet assistance by the CCP, the belief that opportune moments for intervention had elapsed, and the assertion that covert aid would represent a more cost-effective means of achieving CCP objectives.

This analysis of competing hypotheses demonstrated thoroughness and generally mirrored Communist calculations. However, it appeared to place less emphasis on the sociological factors influencing Communist strategic leadership and leaned more toward a cold realist approach to decision making.

It is imperative to recognize that the adversary retains agency in any conflict. The Chinese Communists demonstrated a steadfast commitment to operational security and deceptive practices to obfuscate indications of their significant intervention. UN intelligence partially discerned a substantial buildup of Communist forces along the Manchuria-North Korea border. When in proximity to or crossing the border, commanders meticulously enforced camouflage measures for troops during daylight hours to evade aerial surveillance, permitting troop movement only under the cover of darkness. This strategy drew from the Communists’ experiences in the Chinese Civil War, where camouflage and deception played pivotal roles in countering a predominantly mechanized Chinese nationalist adversary and, subsequently, the US military.

To obscure visual detection of force buildup, Chinese forces employed dispersal and deception tactics. Local materials such as dirt and foliage were utilized to conceal structures and defensive positions. Transport vehicles were disguised with natural foliage and strategically positioned adjacent to hedgerows to mask their presence from photo reconnaissance. Complementing visual deception, the Chinese endeavored to minimize their electronic signal footprint. Their forces

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predominantly relied on landlines rather than the mobile radios typical of fully mechanized armies, owing to their reliance on Soviet provisions or acquisition from battling Nationalist forces in previous years. While this limited their ability to swiftly coordinate with frontline units, it mitigated the risk of detectable signatures that could alert US forces to their presence. Furthermore, encoded messages were transmitted at predetermined times and frequencies, with explicit instructions for recipients not to acknowledge receipt, thereby minimizing evidence of their operational activities.\textsuperscript{19}

**SIGINT**

The organizational structure of the contemporary US SIGINT community owes much of its evolution to the challenges encountered during the Korean War era. Following World War II, significant reductions in manpower and resources occurred across the security landscape. Despite the establishment of key entities such as the United States Air Force, the CIA, the National Security Council, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947, intelligence components within these organizations received minimal resource allocation, leading to disruptions in their operational capacities. SIGINT was no exception, as numerous personnel, equipment, and organizational capabilities were downsized.

Concurrent with North Korea's invasion, the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA) emerged as the principal entity responsible for military SIGINT. Established in July 1949 with the objective of enhancing US cryptography, AFSA sought to streamline efforts and enhance efficiency across the military SIGINT community by consolidating the processing of SIGINT data from the Army Security Agency (ASA), United States Air Force Security Service (USAFSS), and Naval Security Group (NSG).

In 1952, President Truman commissioned the Brownell Committee to conduct an analysis aimed at identifying improvements to the underperforming SIGINT apparatus. The committee's investigation revealed significant shortcomings in AFSA's strategic efficacy, citing its limited legal authority over collection assets, which resulted in siloed reporting.\textsuperscript{20} Consequently, the administration oversaw the dissolution of AFSA and the establishment of the National Security Agency (NSA) in 1952.


During its brief tenure, AFSA made notable strides in the collection and dissemination of intelligence, particularly in the realm of communications intelligence (COMINT, comprising data intelligible in human language rather than mere numbers and sounds). However, at the onset of the conflict, COMINT resources were ill-equipped to decipher daily Chinese activities. It was not until December 1950 that the theater saw a nominal presence of Chinese linguists, with recruitment efforts to address this shortfall proving inadequate until June 1951, likely due to the primary focus on North Korea and the perceived urgency of Soviet military involvement.

Moreover, the SIGINT community faced significant challenges with the scarcity of collection facilities within the Korean peninsula itself. Initially, US SIGINT operations circumvented this limitation by leveraging resources from the British Government Communications Headquarters, based in Hong Kong, and collaborating with Chinese Nationalist forces in the region. Prior to Chinese intervention, both entities furnished valuable insights into large-scale troop movements from southern to northern China, indicative of force buildup along the North Korean border. Additionally, a wealth of reliable data emanated from intercepted civil communications within Communist China, shedding light on various facets such as the economic landscape (evidenced by civil society demonstrations), military deployments (evident from immunization initiatives), and logistical activities (observed through reports of jammed rail stations) pertaining to the PLA.

During the clandestine PLA maneuver across the Yalu River in mid-October 1950, scant SIGINT indicators hinted at the occurrence of this event. The PLA predominantly comprised infantry units operating under stringent radio silence protocols. With limited radio equipment at their disposal, communication relied primarily on hand-delivered messages or encoded broadcasts at predetermined times and frequencies. These deliberate measures virtually ensured tactical surprise, notably evidenced by the lack of organic SIGINT support for the 1st US Marines stationed near the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. Consequently, they remained unaware of the imminent threat posed by a massive influx of Chinese troops, comprising approximately thirty divisions, on 26 November 1950.

US Army units employed low-level voice intercept (LLVI) capabilities near static front lines, beginning in the summer of 1951. These units monitored Chinese telephone conversations by exploiting ground-wave emissions transmitted through

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telephone wires. However, this form of intelligence gathering posed considerable risks, as intelligence collection personnel had to be close to enemy encampments to intercept emissions of sufficient strength. Subsequently, this intelligence was swiftly relayed to provide timely warnings regarding the timing, location, and magnitude of impending Chinese attacks. Throughout the remainder of the conflict, UN troops effectively utilized this technique to bolster defenses against Communist offensives at strategic locations such as Triangle Hill (Hill 395), Old Baldy (Hill 266), and Pork Chop Hill (Hill 255).

The US Air Force and South Korean intelligence achieved notable successes through the interception of Chinese Air Force communications. USAFSS operations were predominantly situated at the Tactical Air Control Center in Seoul, facilitating seamless communication between SIGINT collectors and air controllers. This operational setup ensured swift intelligence dissemination as soon as information could be processed.

In a specific instance, orders from the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) headquarters in Beijing to its 5th Air Division in Manchuria were intercepted by USAFSS COMINT Detachment 13. Following translation, the USAFSS promptly alerted American fighter aircraft to the potential presence of Chinese aircraft. The subsequent day, a formation comprising eight IL-10 bombers alongside Yak-9 and MiG-15 fighters encountered American P-51 and F-86 fighters, which were scrambled to the area based on intelligence intercepts. This timely response effectively disrupted a Chinese operation near Sinuiju.  

**HUMINT**

At the outset of the war, the United States possessed limited HUMINT (intelligence derived from human sources such as interrogation, source operations, and debriefings) capabilities focused on North Korean or Chinese activities, as most assets were directed toward monitoring Soviet activities in the Far East. The US Army had established the Korean Liaison Office (KLO) shortly before the war to gather intelligence on North Korea, while the US Air Force maintained a small Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) with a handful of native South Korean linguists. Additionally, the CIA had a presence in the region. However, these disparate military services and civilian agencies did not coordinate their resources centrally to minimize redundancy, as each organization pursued its own internal taskings.

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Echoes of War

Although not fully appreciated by senior military leadership at the time, information gleaned from multiple interrogations of captured Chinese soldiers in early November 1950 provided incontrovertible evidence of Chinese intervention. However, attempts later in the war to centralize control over special operations and certain HUMINT efforts, such as the establishment of the Combined Command Reconnaissance Activities–Korea (CCRAK), faltered primarily due to the lack of administrative or operational authority over field units.

Throughout the conflict, deficiencies in collection assets and essential language expertise were mitigated by recruiting native Koreans sympathetic to the South Korean cause. Many of these recruits underwent brief training to infiltrate enemy lines, gathering crucial information on capabilities, troop positions, and intentions to strike. Two major operations orchestrated by the US Army were Operation Aviary and Operation Salamander.

Although the CIA was the first to deploy Korean recruits behind enemy lines at the war's onset, Operation Aviary entailed air-dropping trained agents short distances ahead of UN battle lines. However, this airborne operation proved largely unsuccessful due to many agents’ lack of long-range radio capabilities to relay information effectively and the persistent risks of detection. Conversely, Operation Salamander achieved somewhat greater success, with agents inserted along the west and east coasts of the Korean peninsula. Amphibious insertion methods offered safer means for agents and provided multiple escape routes. By the summer of 1951, improvements in communication, facilitated by continuous wave radios, enabled agents to transmit data to UN listening posts. Nevertheless, recruit losses remained substantial, ultimately diminishing the impact of tactical intelligence gleaned from a HUMINT perspective on enemy troop movements.

Conclusion

In assessing US intelligence performance during this conflict, the organizations tasked with preventing strategic surprises fell short. However, when examining tactical intelligence matters, numerous successes emerged, contributing to timely warnings of impending PLA attacks. Nonetheless, resource allocation to achieve these results lagged at the outbreak of the war. From this broad analysis, three lessons emerge.

25 Appleman, South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu. 8–12.
Firstly, historical evidence demonstrates recurring instances of significant military surprises approximately every decade since the 1930s. Examples include the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the North Korean and Chinese Communist invasions of 1950, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, the Beirut barracks bombing in 1983, the fall of the Soviet Union and its threat to the United States in 1991, the al-Qaeda terrorist attack on 9/11 in 2001, the meteoric rise of the Islamic State in 2014, the first invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2014, and most recently, Hamas’ terrorist attack on Israel in 2023. Analysts should recognize this pattern and incorporate it into their strategic warning frameworks. Practically, analysts and strategic thinkers should develop hypotheses with a keen awareness of this historical context. Surprises, in many respects, should not be entirely unexpected.

Secondly, employing contemporary structured thinking techniques such as alternative futures hypothesis generation, high impact/low probability analysis, and intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) offer valuable starting points for assessing Chinese military thought. When crafting courses of action, US analysts must prioritize understanding how the Chinese perceive and intend to conduct warfare, typically elucidated in doctrinal concepts of strategy. Grasping the “ways” in modern strategic thinking is challenging but leveraging fundamental and authoritative Chinese-source documents from institutions like China’s Academy of Military Science—including works such as the Science of Military Strategy or Science of Campaigns, defense white papers, five-year plan documents, and various official PLA statements—can facilitate this endeavor. While these documents provide a general framework rather than precise prescriptions for force employment, they furnish sufficient specificity to support analytic conclusions with heightened confidence. Notably, such published materials were unavailable to analysts during the Korean War, who had to rely on historical documentation detailing Communist strategies from the Chinese Civil War.

Moreover, the process of developing Chinese military strategy since the ascension of the CCP to power is primarily influenced by political leadership perceptions, rather than solely by military generals. This signifies that top political figures not only determine the objectives (ends) but also play a significant role in shaping the approaches (ways) and resource allocation (means). This contrasts with the US military’s approach to strategy; wherein political leaders often delegate substantial autonomy to the Department of Defense in devising strategies through the national defense authorization process.28

Furthermore, cultural disparities between Eastern and Western perspectives influence the formulation of strategy. Eastern paradigms typically prioritize relational dynamics, as evidenced by concepts such as Chain Reaction Warfare (potential for one conflict to cause another). Western approaches tend to emphasize categorization, exemplified by tools like the acronym DIME (diplomatic, information, military, and economic). Seminal texts that shape Chinese military strategy, such as the *Art of War*, underscore this relational perspective, offering invaluable cultural insights essential for deriving intelligence analyses.

Thirdly, the effectiveness of a nation’s intelligence apparatus hinges on institutional prioritization. Intelligence achieves its maximum effectiveness only when ample time and resources are allocated to the organizations tasked with providing decision advantages to policy makers and operatives. The challenges inherent in uncovering and disseminating information intentionally concealed by China necessitate careful consideration by intelligence consumers. The PLA’s success in executing surprise attacks was partly due to a lack of information sources readily available to intelligence analysts, particularly after post–World War II cutbacks led to the depletion of linguistic teams proficient in Mandarin and Korean. Essential components such as passive SIGINT collection towers, specialized HUMINT assets tailored to the era’s requirements, and a cadre of all-source analysts with deep expertise on China were notably absent.

The intelligence community of that era grappled with its own set of challenges, including poor interagency coordination and human resource deficiencies. These issues hindered intelligence efforts from being timely, coherent, and pertinent to operational users. As noted earlier, the US Air Force established its own interrogation teams in 1949 under the Office of Special Investigations, a HUMINT mission better suited for the Army’s KLO or CIA assets. Whether this stemmed from resource limitations or bureaucratic control issues remains uncertain, but the failure to synchronize collection efforts and disseminate information through centralized analysis channels, instead of fragmented stovepipes, diminished the capacity to develop a comprehensive threat assessment. Even if these tactical issues were addressed, the strained relationship between GEN Douglas MacArthur and intelligence persisted at the operational level. CIA analysts faced obstacles such as denial of access to facilities and theater reporting from the Far East Command headquarters in Japan, which served as the primary source of intelligence flowing

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to Washington from the various services.\textsuperscript{30} These challenges, coupled with less prominent systemic issues, constituted significant friction points in the lead-up to the impending North Korean invasion.

At the strategic coordination level, intelligence faced challenges in harmonizing efforts among the various military services and the CIA. In 1949, Congress recognized its oversight responsibilities amidst the Cold War transition, leading to the publication of the Dulles-Jackson-Correa Report. This report highlighted overlapping responsibilities and rampant duplicative efforts within intelligence entities. It specifically noted that the CIA “has not as yet adequately exercised its function to coordinate these and other estimates . . . [and] arrangements are lacking for regularly ensuring that assumptions are comparable, analytical methods valid, and the final estimates as sound as possible.”\textsuperscript{31} However, the report’s recommendations were not acted upon until six months into the war, when the Office of National Estimates (ONE) was formed at the CIA under the leadership of Director of Central Intelligence Walter Smith.

Ultimately, the Chinese military strategy employed during the Korean War continues to shape the modern geopolitical landscape, necessitating attention from various political and military stakeholders now and continually. While intelligence remains a crucial tool, the defense community must consistently uphold the hard-earned lessons from the war to effectively counter Chinese strategy. Failure to do so could leave them vulnerable to the PLA’s maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific region.

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\textsuperscript{31} “Report, the Central Intelligence Agency and National Organization for Intelligence, by Chairman Allen W. Dulles, William H. Jackson, and Mathias F. Correa,” National Security Archive, 1 January 1949, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/. The Dulles-Jackson-Correa Report, also referred to as the Intelligence Survey Group (ISG) or the Dulles Report, was commissioned following a National Security Council decision to assess the structure, operations, and personnel of the Central Intelligence Agency. Chaired by Allen Dulles, the committee comprised Mathias F. Correa and William H. Jackson. In its assessment, the Dulles survey group criticized the CIA for its failure to effectively fulfill its coordinating functions, to meet its designated obligations in producing national intelligence, and for inadequately managing both its internal affairs and its interdepartmental responsibilities. While the report did not propose amendments to existing legislation, it emphasized the need for improved collaboration between the CIA and the Secretaries of State and Defense.