

Murder at Panmunjom: The Role of the Theater Commander in Crisis Resolution

In October 1953, the Joint Security Area (JSA) was established astride the Demilitarization Zone (DMZ) and designated as a neutral area for conducting peaceful meetings between DPRK and UNC personnel. From July 1953 to July 1976, a reported 25 physical confrontations occurred between JSA guards from the Korean People's Army (KPA) and their United Nations Command (UNC) counterparts, in addition to numerous threats, verbal abuse, and other acts of harassment that took place during this period. On August 18, 1976, two U.S. officers were murdered at Panmunjom during an altercation in which North Korean guards confronted and attacked a joint US-South Korean work party assigned to a routine operation to clear the surrounding vegetation obstructing the line-of-sight along the JSA. General Richard G. Stilwell, the current theater commander at the time, formulated and executed a response in which a joint US-ROK force entered the JSA in an overwhelming show of force and cut down the obstructing poplar tree in sight of KPA forces, whose leadership later took responsibility for the earlier killings. General Stilwell's leadership and successful execution of a response to resolve the Panmunjom crisis serves as a useful case study for the U.S. and South Korea on how to successfully control and resolve an international crisis with the North, in a manner that leaves the U.S. and its allies in a strong position of moral and political strength.

This research paper by Colonel Conrad DeLateur explores the events following the murder of two U.S. officers by North Korean military personnel in the Joint Security Area (JSA) near Panmunjom known as the "axe murder incident", and the role of theater commander in effecting resolution of an international crisis through studying the role of General Richard G. Stilwell's leadership, initial reactions, planning, and successful execution of Operation Paul Bunyan in controlling and resolving the crisis following the Axe Murder incident.

DeLateur writes:

"He [General Stilwell] believed US action in relation to the challenge should conform to customary standards of international law; that is, an injured nation is justified in taking reprisal action in a degree equivalent to, but not exceeding, the level of injury. In spite of this, General Stilwell felt an "eye-for-eye" reprisal would have led to unnecessary escalation and bloodshed. His operational concept provided for a honorable, resolute solution to the crisis, while accomplishing the tactical and political objectives." [page 29]

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