THE AUGUST 1976 INCIDENT REVISITED—THE LAST NEARLY NUCLEAR WAR IN KOREA

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MARCH 2, 2018

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay by Peter Hayes suggests that the August 1976 crisis presents important parallels to today's situation in Korea that bear on the risk of war and the use of nuclear weapons in a renewed Korean conflict. Writes Hayes, "Since 1976, no American president has allowed such a dangerous situation to evolve without the White House retaining the authority to escalate to all-out war, let

alone allow nuclear weapons to be deployed in the midst of the area most likely to explode into extraordinary violence."

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Banner image: DOD Operation Paul Bunyan.

II. NAPSNET SPECIAL REPORT BY PETER HAYES

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In August 1976, the United States and North Korea came close to nuclear war over the removal of a tree in the Joint Security Area at Panmunjon. In the lead up to the culminating Operation Paul Bunyan on August 20 which removed the offending tree, Stillwell himself stated that "although it is only a damn tree, it involves a major principle…[the] exercise of our right to take essential measures, which are in no way prejudicial to the KPA security forces, to insure the protection of our forces. We cannot accept the premise that measures to protect our forces must be concurred in by the KPA."

At the time, the United States has just pulled out of Vietnam and was perceived by many to be in retreat from its Cold War commitments. Nixon had resigned, and President Ford was viewed to be a weak leader in many Asian countries. In the lead up to the altercation on August 18 in which North Koreans killed 2 American soldiers attempting to trim the poplar tree and injured other Americans and South Koreans, it was obvious that the North Koreans were increasingly aggressive and insulting to their US and South Korean counterparts in the Joint Security Area. North Korea was still in a battle with South Korea for support from non-aligned countries, from whom it was seeking condemnation of the US military presence in the ROK.

Negotiating with the North Koreans: The U.S. Experience at Panmunjon, an account of the August 1976 incident[1] was prepared by former Marine Colonel Conrad DeLateur in 1977 and is a detailed account of the incident. It is important to revisit this report because it reveals that the United States was fully prepared to go to war in order to restore what it viewed to be the rules set under the Armistice for how the Joint Security Area would operate.

This response included assembling a true armada of offshore US forces buttressed by a display of bombers and fighter aircraft overhead, the full alerting of US and ROK ground forces, the movement forward of tactical nuclear weapons still in Korea, and the pre-delegation to the field commander under General Stillwell of authority to use artillery to attack a North Korean barracks north of the DMZ should they interfere with the tree cutting operation, and a local show of massive force during the tree cutting operation.

It also reveals that General Stillwell resisted the White House being involved in the operation by commandeering the only two secure telephone lines into South Korea at the time, and effectively making them one way (by putting Styrofoam cups over the microphones) so that the White House

could hear what was going on in the command post, but not communicate back to Stillwell or his field commanders if they felt so impelled.

In sum, President Ford authorized in an operation in which the theater commander was authorized to attack the North Koreans with artillery that, should it have occurred, would have had a high probability of not only starting a full-scale resumption of the Korean War, but would have done so with nuclear artillery shells in the midst of the warzone and subject to loss of control and seizure by the North Koreans, or leading to early nuclear first use—without the chain of command able in real time to communicate to General Stillwell unless he chose to remove the Styrofoam cups.

Since 1976, no American president has allowed such a dangerous situation to evolve without the White House retaining the authority to escalate to all-out war, let alone allow nuclear weapons to be deployed in the midst of the area most likely to explode into extraordinary violence.

Given the parallels today with 1976—a geopolitical situation in East Asia in flux, the perception of many in the region that the United States is withdrawing from its past commitments and that the current US President is erratic and weak, the emergence of an energetic North Korean leader who has reverted to an activist and confrontational posture more similar to Kim Il Sung in 1976 than his father in the two decades before Kim Jong Un came to power—it is worth revisiting the August 1976 Incident.

There are also important differences—this time, it is North Koreans who have nuclear weapons in the proximity of a potential war zone whereas US nuclear weapons are stored in the United States itself; South Korea is now a full-fledged democracy, middle power, and is the dominant Korea in every respect and it can exercise *a de facto* veto over the military actions of the US military in Korea should it feel obliged; and neither China nor Russia will back North Korea in a resumed Korean War begun by the DPRK in contrast to the postures of China and the Soviet Union in 1976 both of which were actively aligned with and formally allied with the DPRK, unlike today.

Another contextual change since 1976 is worth noting. In 1976, it was possible for a major military operation to be instigated, with reinforcements mobilized to head for Korea and aircraft and warships in Korea and Japan as well as Guam to be alerted and mobilized, under conditions of near complete secrecy. Only one American journalist nearly twigged to Operation Paul Bunyan the night before the operation, and did not in fact reveal the plans to the public (and thereby to the North Koreans who were surprised at the arrival of the tree cutting force early on the morning of August 20, 1976).

Today, it is unimaginable that such a mobilization would not become public in near real-time. Instead, mass media and social media would broadcast and speculate about the mobilization, lending it many possible meanings to those monitoring this information. The North Koreans would not be surprised at the arrival of a US-ROK ground force, and they would be far more likely with modern weapons to not only hit, but to bring down a helicopter with a US field commander in it as they nearly did in the August 20 1978 operation—as is noted in this report.

A second critical change is that the relatively slow motion US-ROK response involving the mobilization of ground, air, and naval forces in 1976. Today, the “escalation ladder” would be compressed from days and hours into minutes and seconds once war breaks out, due to the fantastic deployment of rapid fire missile systems on both sides of the DMZ.

Stillwell clearly had confidence in his rules of engagement and communications connectivity such that even if his field commander felt obliged to use military force to counter North Koreans interfering with his tree cutting and obstacle removing operation (which included “overly

enthusiastic" South Korean special forces smashing up North Korean posts in the Joint Security Area which was not part of the US plan), he would have time to review the situation, consult with Pacific Command, the Joint Chiefs, and the White House, and to respond without automatic escalating to full-scale war.

It is hard to imagine such confidence prevailing today.

Many Americans have either forgotten or never knew about this incident. However, it was a defining post Cold War moment for the Korean Peoples' Army and its leaders—such as General Kim Yong Chol who just led the North Korean delegation to the closing ceremony of the Olympics. And one South Korean who will not have forgotten its historical lessons is none other than now President Moon Jae-in who was one of the Korean soldiers in Operation Paul Bunyan.

No doubt there will be many more histories written that contest DeLateur's conclusion that ""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."

Meanwhile, this report contains a salutary reminder of how a confrontation over a poplar tree nearly led to war and nuclear war. No-one knows what poplar trees lie in wait for us in the coming weeks and months.

It was obtained under a US Freedom of Information Act, and was drawn on in the writing of *Pacific Powderkeg, American Nuclear Dilemmas*. This is, however, the first time the source document has been made public. We do so because we believe that it is critically important for all policy makers to understand fully the danger of the continuation of the Korean conflict.

III. ENDNOTES

[1] Conrad DeLateur, *Murder at Panmunjon: The Role of the Theater Commander in Crisis Resolution*, US Department of State Foreign Service Institute Research Paper, 29th Session, 1986-87, released to Nautilus Institute under US Freedom of Information Act request, at: https://nautilus.org/foia-document/murder-at-panmunjom-the-role-of-the-theater-commander-in-crisis-resolution/

It may be read in conjunction with another report also released to Nautilus: R. Probst, *Negotiating with the North Koreans: The U.S. Experience at Panmunjon*, US Army War College Military Studies Program Paper, Carlisle Barracks, May 16, 1977, released under US FOIA request to Nautilus Institute and found at: https://nautilus.org/projects/by-name/foia/negotiating-with-north-korean--the-u-s-experience-at-panmunjom/

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