The Quiet War: Combat Operations Along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, 1966–1969*

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FROM 1966 to 1969, American and South Korean troops fought a series of skirmishes against North Korean soldiers in an undeclared war along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas. The "Quiet War," as South Koreans came to refer to these incidents, had important ramifications in Vietnam and Washington. The fighting, originally seen as a nuisance rather than a serious danger, eventually threatened to explode into a crisis of the first magnitude. On several occasions, the peninsula teetered on the edge of war. The United States tried to contain this danger, while South Korea attempted to enflame the crisis. These differences reflected divergent political goals, and eventually forced the two countries to cancel military plans in Vietnam at a critical juncture in that conflict.

This period in U.S.-Korean relations has received little attention from historians. Combat operations in Korea are never mentioned in the fine work of H. W. Brands and the equally good compilations edited by Diane B. Kunz, and Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker on the foreign policies of the Johnson administration.[1] Vandon E. Jenerette, a

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1. H. W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism: Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Diane B. Kunz, ed., *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade: American Foreign Relations During the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf

major in the U.S. Army, wrote an article on the Quiet War, using a number of military documents. This piece is informative, but Jenerette goes beyond his cited evidence, contending that the attacks were an attempt by the North Koreans to create a "second front" for the United States and draw American resources from Vietnam. He bases his interpretation on a speech Kim Il-sung gave on the need for communist nations to aid Vietnam in its struggle against the United States. In a portion of the speech that Jenerette does not quote, Kim makes it clear that he wanted other countries to send combat troops to Southeast Asia. Robert Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee briefly mention the Quiet War in their study of Korean communism. Taking the raids out of a Cold War context, Scalapino and Lee look at this period as just one of the many efforts the North made over time to unify the peninsula on its terms. According to these two scholars, the North Koreans attempted to use the raids into the South as a way of inducing a general insurrection similar to the effort of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam.

It is important to remember that the division of Korea after World War II had no historical basis and that each of the two regimes, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK), claimed to be the sole government of the peninsula and had supporters on both sides of the DMZ. Although the motivation for North Korean actions will remain uncertain until researchers have access to the archives in Pyongyang, it is important to note that what little documentation is available supports the Scalapino and Lee interpretation. These sources also indicate that communist ideology led the North Koreans to underestimate the foundation of support that existed in the South for the Republic.[2] The most extensive study of the subject is Daniel Bolger's *Scenes from an Unfinished War*. Bolger, a major in the U.S. Army, focuses on the development of low intensity doctrine and operational responses to the North Korean raids. His "economy of force" argument that the Vietnam War forced the allies to fight in Korea with the limited means available requires some modification. This thesis accurately describes the American response, but not that of the South Koreans.[3]

Tucker, eds., *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

2. Vandon E. Jenerette, "The Forgotten DMZ," *Military Review* 58 (May 1988): 32–43; Robert Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee, *Communism in Korea*, vol. 1, *The Movement* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 638n–639n, 647–53.

3. Daniel Bolger, *Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low Intensity Conflict in Korea, 1966–69*, Leavenworth Paper No. 19 (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1991).

In 1953 the belligerent nations in the Korean War signed an armistice that created the demilitarized zone and perpetuated the division of the peninsula. The military demarcation line along the 38th parallel served as the actual boundary between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north and the Republic of Korea in the south. The DMZ, or "the Z" in the slang of the American troops serving in the area, was a two-kilometer-deep zone on either side of the demarcation line that ran across the entire width of the peninsula. The armistice signatories established a number of rules governing activity in the zone. Each side could and did send small, lightly armed patrols to monitor the region, but the agreement prohibited the deployment of mortars, artillery, tanks, or any other type of heavy weapons. The settlement also prohibited the construction of fortifications in the DMZ.[4] In the years following the armistice, there were a few scattered exchanges of gunfire. These episodes resulted in eight American fatalities, but were isolated and never precipitated a major crisis.[5]

This stable, but semi-dangerous, state of affairs began to change in the fall of 1966. In October, North Korean troops began making small, armed incursions across the demarcation line. A Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) map of these confrontations shows that these raids occurred almost equally in the eastern, central, and western sectors of the demilitarized zone. The North Koreans attacked only South Korean units, killing twenty-eight soldiers. American troops were not involved in these engagements.[6]

These raids infuriated the South Korean military, and the ROK Army quietly began planning a retaliatory raid. The Koreans never told their Americans allies anything about this operation. Nevertheless, General Charles H. Bonesteel III, American commander in Korea, heard rumors about the planned raid. Bonesteel served as both the commanding general of the U.S. Eighth Army and Commander-in-Chief United Nations (UN) Command. In this latter position he had operational command of all Korean combat forces. On 20 October, Bonesteel met with Kim Sung-eun, the Minister of National Defense, and told him that an attack could have severe and unintended political and diplomatic impact on the pending visit of President Lyndon B. Johnson to the peninsula and a scheduled UN General Assembly debate on Korea. In Bonesteel's own words, the minister's reaction was "non-committal." Two days later,

4. Walter G. Hermes, *Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington: GPO, 1966), 422–35, 516–17.

5. Jenerette, "The Forgotten DMZ," 34.

6. "CIA Intelligence Memorandum: Armed Incidents Along the Korean DMZ," 8 November 1966, Korea Memos vol. 3, box 255, Korea Country File, National Security File, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter referred to as LBJL), Austin, Texas.

Bonesteel met with General Kim Kae-wan, the Chief of Staff of the ROK Army, and delivered the same message. The warnings of the tall, gaunt, one-eyed general were ignored. On 26 October, American officers in Bonesteel's command began receiving fragmentary information about a raid into North Korea. The Americans quickly confirmed a "highly successful" foray in the eastern sector of the DMZ that resulted in thirty North Korean casualties. Bonesteel was unable to learn if the raid went beyond the northern edge of the demilitarized zone. He quickly ordered Lieutenant General Suh Jyong-chul, his Korean subordinate, to conduct an investigation and discipline the responsible "hot-headed junior officers."[7]

When Johnson arrived in Korea, President Park Chung-hee downplayed the attacks and probes. He stated that the North normally staged a number of incidents and incursions during key moments in international affairs to distract the public of the South. According to the American record of the conversation, Park told his guest that "these incidents are an irritating factor, but not a serious danger." The Korean president did, however, warn his American counterpart: "If fighting increases in Vietnam, there may be increased and more sustained pressure at the DMZ."[8]

Only hours after this meeting ended, the North Koreans responded to the ROK raid. At 3:15 a.m. on 2 November, an enemy squad ambushed an eight-man patrol from the U.S. 2d Infantry Division. Two American four-man squads had combined after one of their radios became inoperative. As the group moved under the light of a full moon, they walked into a trap. North Korean troops quietly marched parallel to the Americans, swung in front of them, set up a hastily prepared position, and then began throwing grenades and firing on the Americans. Explosive fragments tore forty-eight holes into Private First Class David L. Bibee, knocking the unconscious man down a hill. The patrol fought back, but the North Koreans cut the group apart. The noise of the gunfire was heard back at the patrol's base, and a motorized unit responded.[9]

As the relief patrol approached, the North Koreans began stripping the American bodies of ammunition, weapons, and souvenirs. Covered

7. General Charles H. Bonesteel III to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 3 November 1966, Korea Cables vol. 3, box 255, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

8. "Meeting Between President Johnson and President Park (with staffs), in Seoul, November 1, 1966," 7 November 1966, Asian Trip October 17–2 November 1966, box 48, Appointment File [Diary Backup], LBJL.

9. Jenerette, "The Forgotten DMZ," 35–36, 43; Bolger, *Unfinished War,* 37–39; *Washington Post,* 4 November 1966; *St. Louis Post Dispatch,* 2 November 1966; U.S. Ambassador to Korea Winthrop G. Brown to Secretary of State, 2 November 1966, Korea Cables vol. 3, box 255, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

in blood at the bottom of a hill, Bibee could hear the North Koreans talking as they moved among the dead. "One of them came up and shined a light in my face—a red light," he later told reporters. "He shined it down on my wrist and he jerked my watch off. I played like I was dead," he explained. "The only reason I'm alive now, is because I didn't move." After pillaging the bodies, the North Koreans dragged their dead and wounded from the scene. When the motorized patrol arrived, Bibee was the sole survivor. Seven Americans and one Korean soldier on augmented duty with the patrol were dead.[10]

When the President woke in the morning, Bonesteel briefed him and Secretary of State Dean Rusk on the attack. He also informed them of the South Korean strike into the North.[11] Since the ambush was the first attack on American troops and came during Johnson's trip to Korea, it was the lead story in newspapers across the United States. Several papers ran banner headlines. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* ran its headline at the top of the page, even above its masthead. According to the editorial board of the *Washington Post,* the ambush was "another warning that no reliance can be put on any arrangements with Asian communism that are not self-enforcing or buttressed by power."[12]

The United States responded with a public relations offensive. The Army let Bibee talk to reporters after he spent two days in the hospital. That same day, the Army announced that one of the dead soldiers was being posthumously nominated for the Medal of Honor. On 5 November, at a previously scheduled meeting of the military armistice commission at the village of Panmunjom, Major General Richard G. Cicolela delivered a stern warning to the North Koreans: "Make no mistake. The path of self-destruction that you have toed is leading toward more bloodshed. The responsibility for whatever course may develop from continued acts of hostility will rest clearly on your side." The General intended for these remarks to convey a strong and firm warning, while avoiding specific threats. "The United Nations command will not shirk its duties under whatever conditions exist. Your side is now traveling on a collision course. My mission is to stay at this table until you understand the gravity of the present situation." When the North Korean representatives argued that no engagement had occurred, Cicolela offered to fly them to the location and let them inspect the site on their own. A helicopter then

10. Brown to Secretary of State, 2 November 1966, Korea Cables vol. 3, box 255, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

11. Bonesteel to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 3 November 1966, ibid.

12. *Chicago Tribune,* 2 November 1966; *Washington Post,* 2 and 3 November 1966; *St. Louis Post Dispatch,* 2 November 1966; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* 2 November 1966; Baltimore *Sun,* 2 and 3 November 1966.

landed at Panmunjom. The North Koreans declined the flight.[13] Cicolela had outplayed the communists in the propaganda arena.

President Johnson also joined the public relations offensive. He said nothing about the attack when he left Korea, or when he arrived in Alaska. He did make some remarks when his plane landed at Dulles International Airport outside Washington, D.C., on 2 November (3 November in Korea). He said the seven dead Americans were killed doing their duty to keep others free: "They died because there are men in this world who still believe that might makes right. They use force. They won't let other people live in peace." Two days later at a White House press conference, his comments were sharper. He called the ambush "totally unjustified murder." Johnson, however, ended his remarks with words of restraint: "The United States of America does not plan to violate the terms of [the] armistice."[14]

These gestures and statements were directed toward several different groups. The North Koreans were one, and the American public was another. South Korea, however, was the most important audience. With two ROK Army divisions and the bulk of the U.S. Army fighting in Vietnam, the last thing Americans wanted was a second front or a rear guard action on the peninsula. The United States had to make it clear to the South Koreans that it would stand with them in this moment of crisis, but the Americans also had to restrain their allies from escalating the situation.

North Korean attacks on South Korean and American troops continued after the 2 November ambush. There were, however, few attacks in the winter months, when the bitter cold and the lack of foliage for cover made combat operations difficult. All told, there were a total of forty-two incidents in 1966. In March and April 1967, when the temperature increased, the attacks started again. The engagements in the spring were small and involved lightly armed patrols, but grew in size and intensity in the summer.[15] This seasonal pattern held throughout the Quiet War.

13. The soldier in question did not receive the Medal of Honor, and procedures for nominating service personnel for this decoration were later changed to prevent premature disclosures such as this one. *Washington Post,* 4 and 5 November 1966; *New York Times,* 5 November 1966; Brown to Secretary of State, November 2, 1966, Korea Cables vol. 3, box 255, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

14. Remarks at Dulles International Airport Upon Returning from the Asian-Pacific Trip, 2 November 1966; The President's News Conference, 4 November 1966, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1966,* vol. 2 (Washington: GPO, 1967), 1303–4, 1320.

15. Military Armistice Commission (MAC) to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27 January 1968, Korea-Pueblo Incident Military Cables vol. 1, box 263–264, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

The frequency and intensity of these incidents exploded in 1967, expanding to include encounters in the air and on the water. North Korean jets crossed into South Korean airspace. North Korean shore batteries fired on and sank a South Korean ship in January. The ROK Navy sank several ships attempting to land infiltrators in April. Two ship-to-shore firefights, one in the South and one in the North, followed later that year. In the summer months North Korean units forced the residents of small, southern villages to attend political indoctrination meetings. In August North Korean artillery fired on a South Korean army barracks, and communist commandos blew up a train well south of the demilitarized zone. Amphibious assaults occurred near depots that stored nuclear weapons. "Boy, this was an eye-opener as to what you could do with this porous [guerrilla] warfare," Bonesteel observed. The U.S. Army quickly built heavy bunkers for the storage of these weapons, which had several layers of chain link fences to prevent the North Koreans from destroying them with shoulder-launched missiles. Observers paying close attention realized the situation in Korea was becoming more and more daunting. "The sun never sets on the danger spots on which the Johnson administration has to keep a wary eye," declared the editorial board of the *New York Times*.[16]

Korea had become a combat zone. "There's a war here, too," a soldier from California told a newspaper reporter. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed. The Chiefs quietly approved a request to classify the area north of the Imjin river and south of the DMZ as a hostile fire zone. American troops serving in Korea were made eligible for combat medals and awards, although the criteria for awarding these decorations were stricter than those for troops serving in Vietnam. As a result, unit commanders created unauthorized combat badges to recognize service in Korea. The 7th Infantry Division designed a decoration similar to the official Combat Infantryman Badge (CIB). The division badge incorporated a bayonet and the division patch in the center of a wreath, instead of the horizontal infantry musket.[17] In 1968, the regulations for the official awards were revised and made less stringent.[18]

16. *New York Times,* 13, 20, and 21 January; 2 February; 6, 13, 17, 20, and 29 April; 22 and 28 May; 2 and 30 June; 4, 5, 15, 16, and 25 July; 11, 13, 21, 23, and 29 August; 14 September (all dates in 1967); MAC to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27 January 1968, Korea-Pueblo Incident Military Cables vol. 1, box 263–264, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL; Gen. Charles H. Bonesteel III oral history, 353, Senior Officers Debriefing Program, U.S. Army Military History Institute (hereafter referred to as USAMHI), Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, Pa.

17. *New York Times,* 29 January 1968; Jenerette, "The Forgotten DMZ," 40.

18. Bolger, *Unfinished War,* 76–77.

American soldiers found duty difficult in the demilitarized zone, with its ever-present danger. "It's a terrible mixture of boredom and dodging bullets," a sergeant remarked. In the Quiet War the North Koreans had the initiative, picking the time and locations of engagements, which the Americans found particularly frustrating. "At night when you hear a can rattling or an animal moving you think this is it—they're coming across," another noncommissioned officer said. American and South Korean troops soon began initiating combat operations, rather than waiting to be ambushed. According to reports sent to the White House, UN Command troops would often fire on North Korean patrols before they crossed the military demarcation line.[19]

As difficult and dangerous as the Quiet War was for the soldiers fighting and dying in the DMZ, it remained a minor, but troubling issue for the United States. Vietnam was the major American concern in Asia at the moment, and the Republic of Korea had been extremely supportive of that effort, sending two army divisions to Vietnam in 1965 and 1966. These units were the largest allied military commitment to Vietnam and quickly proved themselves able fighters. In a speech to one division, General William C. Westmoreland, commander of American troops in Vietnam, commented, "Perhaps the best compliment to your effectiveness comes from the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong by their hesitancy to engage you in battle. You have earned a reputation among communist forces as men to fear, respect . . . and avoid."[20] The United States underwrote much of the expense for these Korean soldiers, just as it did for the rest of the ROK Army. These troops cost less than American ones and helped reduce the political burden the Johnson administration faced each time it sent more military units to Vietnam. In December 1967, and in the first weeks of 1968, repeated American efforts to get a third Korean division in Vietnam were beginning to produce results. President Park met with Johnson while the two were in Canberra, Australia, and agreed to send an additional light division. The

19. *New York Times,* 29 January, 29 September 1968; Bonesteel to AIG, 27 January 1968; Bonesteel to AIG, 28 January 1968, Korea-Pueblo Incident Military Cables, vol. 1; Ambassador William Porter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, 12 February 1968; Porter to Rusk, 13 February 1968; Porter to Rusk, 18 February 1968, Korea-Pueblo Incident Military Cables, vol. 12, box 263–264, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

20. Robert M. Blackburn, *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994), 31–66; Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 109; General Earle G. Wheeler to Johnson, 17 October 1968, Vietnam Allies 5D(3), box 91, Vietnam Country File, National Security File; "General Westmoreland's Farewell Address to ROK 9th Division," 21 May 1968, Korean Speech, box 17, Papers of William C. Westmoreland, LBJL.

United States accepted a Korean proposal that civilians workers be given the assignments of noncombatant service troops, who would then be replaced with combat troops. With this personnel maneuver, Korea could introduce another division without significantly increasing the total number of its military personnel in Vietnam. In January 1968, American and Korean negotiators were beginning to work out the details of this arrangement. The goal for the arrival in Vietnam of the new ROK Army division was March, just two months away.[21]

North Korean actions quickly scuttled this agreement. On Thursday, 18 January, the thirty-one men of the 124th Army Unit, 283rd Army Group, North Korean People's Army crossed over the military demarcation line and silently passed through an American-monitored sector. The group traveled only at night, keeping to mountain ridges. Each man in this unit was an officer in his mid-twenties who had been training for this mission for two years. These commandos were well armed with grenades, automatic weapons, and explosives. According to Bonesteel, the squad was "loaded to the gills." As they traveled south, the commandos ran into a group of woodcutters. Instead of killing the men, the commandos gave them an indoctrination speech, telling them that the North Korean Army was preparing to come south, unify the country, and rescue their southern brethren from their American exploiters. The timber men went straight to the police when the commandos finished their session. The ROK Army quickly sent out search-and-destroy missions, but the North Koreans used intercepted radio transmissions to dodge the patrols and reach the outskirts of Seoul. A survivor later said infiltrating the South was quite easy.[22]

The target of the raid was the Blue House, the official residence of President Park. The mission was simple: assassinate Park. The unit had practiced their raid for two weeks at a replica of the executive mansion. The group would break down into six squads when they reached their target. Two would attack the guard houses; another two would strike the mansion itself; and the last two teams would destroy the staff offices and procure automobiles for their withdrawal. A secondary target was the U.S. embassy. On 21 January, a thousand yards short of their objective, a suspicious police officer stopped the commandos and quickly exposed the North Koreans. The commandos killed one policeman and retreated as a running firefight broke out in the middle of Seoul.[23]

21. William P. Bundy to Johnson, 16 April 1968, Vietnam Allies 5D(3), box 91, Vietnam Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

22. Bonesteel oral history, 339–40, MHI; *Chosun Ilbo,* 23 January 1968; MAC to Joint Chiefs of Staff, 27 January 1968, Korea-Pueblo Incident Military Cables vol. 1, box 263–264, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

23. Ibid.

The government reacted forcefully, imposing a dusk-to-dawn curfew for the area north of Seoul; the ban lasted from 10 P.M. to 4 A.M. in the capital city itself. The former general in Park Chung-hee came to the fore as he directed the pursuit of the commandos from the Ministry of National Defense. The North Koreans split into small groups as they fled into the mountains north of Seoul. An alerted civilian population made hiding difficult. Reports from civilians helped American and South Korean patrols track down the remnants of the 124th Unit. One North Korean broke into a house demanding food from a terrified housewife. Having finally tasted white rice, the commando went into another room and shot himself. The woman ran away and brought back the police. Second Lieutenant Kim Shin-jo, another member of the 124th Unit, was more fortunate. The commander of the ROK patrol that cornered Kim noticed the southern accent that Kim had inherited from his southern-born parents. His speech probably made him a valuable asset to 124th Unit, making it easier for the group to pass themselves off as southerners. As it turned out, the inflection of his voice saved his life. The South Korean officer was from the same village as Kim's parents, walked out in the open to talk with him, and convinced him to surrender. Kim was the only member of the infiltration team taken alive. A few made it back across the DMZ, but most were killed in isolated exchanges of gunfire with South Korean and American patrols.[24]

The day after his capture, Lieutenant Kim was the focus of a press conference, which only exacerbated the differences between the South Koreans and their American allies. Still dressed in the gray jacket and black pants he wore when he was captured, Kim sat in a chair with his hands cuffed behind his back throughout the entire interview. He explained the purpose of the raid and the training he received, while South Korean officials showed off the weapons they had taken from Kim and his dead comrades. American officials watching the conference noticed Kim's accent, and unaware of the nature of his surrender, suspected that he was a South Korean double agent and that their allies were trying to start another war.[25]

A day later North Korea scored a major coup, when it captured the USS *Pueblo*. The North Korean Navy surrounded and then boarded the ship, while it was sailing off the eastern coast of the peninsula on a mission to collect electronic signal information. This incident was the first

24. *Chosun Ilbo,* 23 and 25 January, 1968; *St. Louis Post Dispatch,* 22 January 1968; *New York Times,* 27 January 1968; Porter to Rusk, 24 January 1968, Folder: 1/1/68, Box 2258, File 33-6, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–69, Record Group (RG) 59, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter referred to as NA).

25. *Chosun Ilbo,* 23 January 1968; Vice Admiral John V. Smith oral history, 428–31, Naval Historical Center, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. I am indebted to Mitch Lerner for alerting me to the existence of this oral history.

time in 150 years that a foreign foe had captured an American ship. Clark Clifford, the new Secretary of Defense, observed that the news of the *Pueblo* nearly broke the will of President Johnson, who thought the seizure of the ship was a communist effort to overextend American resources.[26]

A number of other American observers realized these incidents in Korea had just made American foreign policy in Asia much more complicated. An editorial in the Baltimore *Sun* noted, "The one thing sure is that they serve as a sharp reminder that Vietnam is not the only place that has to be watched in Asia and elsewhere, and not the only region where a deeper American involvement might suddenly be required." Commenting on the Blue House raid, the editorial board of the *Washington Post* noted, "There can be little doubt that North Korea is ready to accept the risk of another war."[27]

American officials were particularly worried that South Korean leaders would initiate a second Korean war in retaliation for these attacks. Long before the Blue House raid in January 1968, President Park was on record favoring strong retaliatory strikes. On 16 September 1967, Bonesteel briefed Park and National Defense Minister Kim on DMZ infiltrations. In a presentation in both English and Korean that took over an hour, Bonesteel covered the enemy threat, conventional and subversive; allied reaction to the DMZ incidents and North Korean guerrilla activity in the interior of South Korea; and developments and responses expected to occur in the future. Park listened and then remarked that the UN Command's response was strong, but doomed to fail; as long as the allies maintained a defensive posture, the attacks would continue. A former division commander on the DMZ, Park could speak with some expertise. According to an American summary of his statement, he insisted that "whenever the North Koreans violate the armistice they must be made to pay by retaliation." Park said if something were not done, the Korean people would demand action. Although he stated that the ROK Army would not move in secret or attempt to undermine Bonesteel's operational authority over Korean troops, his words had a hollow ring, given that the ROK Army raid in 1966 had been taken without Bonesteel's knowledge. The general warned Park that his orders were to protect the south and enforce the armistice. The UN Command gave the Republic of Korea a legitimacy in international relations that North Korea did not enjoy, but unilateral action would only discredit the UN Command. Park retreated a bit. He said if the U.S. government failed to

26. Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 466.

27. Baltimore *Sun*, 24 January 1968; *Washington Post*, 24 January 1968.

grant Bonesteel the authority to wage small-scale retaliatory actions, the attacks would continue.[28]

The Blue House Raid and the *Pueblo* incident only strengthened the urge to respond. On 24 January 1968, Ambassador William Porter met with an enraged Park. The President, in Porter's words, "vehemently" insisted on action. He suggested an allied strike against either the base of the commando unit that conducted the Blue House raid, or the air and naval stations along the east coast. Park said the ROK Army would wait before acting, but retaliatory raids were inevitable. "I think we have what we want from him in the way of assurance," Porter reported in a cable to Washington, "but if there is another incident all bets are off."[29] South Korean public statements underscored Porter's comment. Park warned, "There's a limit to our patience and self restraint." Foreign Minister Choi Kyu-ha added, "The end of the *Pueblo* incident won't solve the Korean Crises."[30]

In the United States, the primary concern remained Vietnam rather than Korea. In nationally televised remarks on the Quiet War, Johnson made this point clear. According to the President, North Korea was trying to intimidate the South: "These attacks may also be an attempt by the communists to divert South Korean and United States military resources which together are now successfully resisting aggression in Vietnam." Agreeing with him, the editorial board of the *New York Times* declared that the raids were an effort to keep Korea from sending more troops to Vietnam: "South Korea's Foreign Minister may not have been wrong in his warning that the *Pueblo* incident is less important than the infiltration across the 38th Parallel. A price is being paid for South Korean involvement in the Vietnam war."[31]

With time, the sentiment among southern leaders grew stronger. Bonesteel and Porter met with Prime Minister Chung Il-kwon, Foreign Minister Choi, and National Defense Minister Kim. The Koreans warned the Americans that they were planning retaliatory measures. If there were another major infiltration, ROK armed forces would respond. In a report to the State Department, Porter dismissed this warning, asserting that Park was in control and favored a measured policy of restraint. Porter nevertheless noted that "at this point ROKs need careful watching." Two days later, after a lengthy meeting with the South Korean president which he later characterized as a "tirade," Porter realized his

28. Cable from Ambassador Porter, 19 September 1967, Korea Memos and Cables vol. 5, box 255, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

29. Porter to Rusk, 24 January 1968, ibid.

30. *New York Times,* 4 February 1968.

31. *New York Times,* 3 February 1968; "The President's Address to the Nation: The Situation with North Korea," 26 January 1968, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968,* vol. 1 (Washington: GPO, 1970), 77.

assessment of Park was wrong. Park told the ambassador that the South did not want another war, but could no longer remain "passive" in the face of continued northern raids. Park told Porter that a retaliatory strike would likely start another war in Korea, and American and Korean forces should begin preparing for the coming conflict. "Foregoing indicates pent-up emotions of ROK president at this point and he gave me two and a half hours of it," the ambassador noted. After returning to the embassy, he advised that the United States had to do something about Park: "On most important matter of restraining ROKs, we may well be at point where we should repeat injunction to Syngman Rhee who at one time also felt need to go north. There is enough danger now without more provocation from NKs [North Koreans] but situation will become very much worse if that happens."[32]

Knowing the importance the Johnson administration placed on Vietnam, Porter urged in another cable that the United States delay on the issue of a third ROK Army division. The ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff had just asked Bonesteel to begin planning for the return of the Korean units currently fighting in Vietnam. The embassy staff in Seoul believed this was a normal request for contingency planning, but called for a cautious response: "For U.S. to press ROKs at present juncture might well result in decision against dispatch, which remains quite reas[ona]ble in my opinion provided there is a satisfactory outcome to *Pueblo*/North Korean armistice violation problem."[33]

Back in Washington, officials were equally concerned about events in Korea and their impact on troop deployments for Vietnam. On 7 February, General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, warned the National Security Council (NSC): "The problems in Korea are such that it will be hard to get the South Koreans to even send the light division they had promised."[34] A third Korean division became even more important when Westmoreland asked for additional troops in the wake of the Tet Offensive. This request forced a profound debate of American policy in Vietnam.[35]

Lyndon Johnson decided he would use foreign troops to avoid the domestic problems an increase would otherwise cause. "Let's assume we

32. Porter to Rusk, 6 February 1968, Folder: U.S.-ROKG Discussions, Box 2261; Porter to Rusk, 6 February 1968; Porter to Rusk, 6 February 1968, Folder 2.8/68, Box 2255, File 33-6, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–69, RG 59, NA.

33. Air Force Chief of Staff to subordinate commands, 29 January 1968, Korea-Pueblo Incident Military Cables vol. 1, box 263–264, Korea Country File; Porter to Rusk, 30 January 1968, Vietnam Allies 5D(3), box 91, Vietnam Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

34. Notes of the President's meeting with the National Security Council, box 2, Tom Johnson Notes of Meetings, LBJL.

35. Clifford, *Counsel to the President,* 476–86, 492–501.

have to have more troops," the President said at another NSC meeting. "I think we should now tell the allies that we could lose Southeast Asia without their help. The first to tell is Park. Tell him that none of us want defeat. If it takes more men to avoid defeat let's get them." Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara said that this idea was unrealistic. "One thing we have to do is put more support in Korea," he said.[36]

Concern that the South might either take some retaliatory action on its own or recall its divisions from Vietnam prompted Johnson to send Secretary of the Army Cyrus R. Vance to Seoul. In the Oval Office the President told Vance that his mission was to convince Park that the United States was as concerned about the raids as it was about the seizure of the *Pueblo,* and that the Americans were determined to seek a peaceful resolution of the crisis. The United States would consult with the Republic of Korea before it took any military action and expected the same consideration in return. Vance was instructed to get the South Koreans to reaffirm that they would observe Bonesteel's authority as Commander in Chief United Nations Command. The South Koreans took a different view of the Vance mission. At a ROK Army dinner thrown in Vance's honor when he first arrived in Seoul, several Korean generals, lubricated with liquor, talked of the vengeance they hoped to exact in the coming march north. The next day, Vance, Porter, and Bonesteel had a conference with Park and his foreign policy team. In this meeting and in individual talks with Foreign Minister Choi and Prime Minister Chung, Vance stressed the common interests of the United States and South Korea, and pointed out the dangers and problems that would come with the actions Park favored. Park backed away from his earlier statement that strikes against the North would result in another war; however, he continued to favor retaliation. "While the President's sincerity was not in doubt," Porter commented, "it was evident that his specific proposals were the product of emotion rather than finished staff work."[37]

Vance had little to offer the South Koreans. "Raiders are nasty business, but no real threat to the stability of South Korea, since most of them are killed or captured," Samuel D. Berger, Assistant Secretary of State and former ambassador to South Korea, declared in a cable to Porter. The main concern in Washington was Vietnam. The State Department believed that any removal of Korean units from Vietnam would be a North Korean victory. "It follows from this thread of argument that

36. Tom Johnson to Lyndon Johnson, 9 February 1968, March 31 Speech, vol. 7, box 49, NSC Histories, National Security File, LBJL.

37. A note on a memo clearly states that President Johnson personally gave Vance his instructions. Memorandum: "Themes for the Mission of Cyrus Vance," 9 February 1968, Folder 2/8/68; Porter to Rusk, 12 February 1968 (five separate communications), Unmarked Folder, Box 2255, File 33-6, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–69, RG 59, NA; Bolger, *Unfinished War,* 74.

when things settle down in South Korea, Pa[r]k could win a moral and psychological victory over Kim Il-sung, show his contempt for Kim, and confidence in himself and his country, if he could announce that additional forces will be sent to Viet-Nam," Berger reasoned.[38]

The Vance mission and Berger's argument had little influence on the South Koreans. American hopes for a third division ended on 22 March, when the U.S. embassy in Seoul reported that Foreign Minister Choi had announced that South Korea would not send any more troops to Vietnam.[39] The United States would have to deal with the manpower issue without any Korean assistance. Three weeks later, as if to confirm the wisdom of the ROK decision, the North Koreans started their raids into the south again.[40]

The United States and South Koreans worked to make the attacks more difficult. The allies started using searchlights, electronic sensors, and night scopes. Army engineers also used heavy diesel plows and defoliants to remove much of the shrubbery along the military demarcation line, making it harder for enemy troops to hide and ambush American and South Korean patrols. Bonesteel ordered the construction of a chain-link fence across the DMZ. While officers and officials in the Pentagon on the other side of the Pacific dismissed the fence as "Bonesteel's Folly," the General defended the barrier. "Damned if it didn't play a very real and useful role," he said. "It was hard to get through one way or the other without leaving traces." Engineers also planted buckwheat fields in front of the Bonesteel fence. The white flowers of this grain made it easier for night scopes to detect the thermal signatures of humans. The ROK Army electrified portions of the chain link fence, but Bonesteel thought little of this effort after the fence electrocuted several South Korean soldiers. "I figured that the best counter-infiltration devices were the eyes, ears and brains of the G.I.," Bonesteel remarked.[41]

The Quiet War continued after Lyndon Johnson left office in 1969. The new President, Richard M. Nixon, inherited a dangerous situation. The North Korean attacks resumed again after the spring thaw.[42] In the early morning hours of 15 April, the North Koreans shot down a U.S.

38. Samuel D. Berger to Embassy in Seoul, 12 February 1968, Unmarked Folder, Box 2255, File 33-6, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967–69, RG 59, NA.

39. Porter to Rusk, 22 March 1968, Korea-Pueblo Incident Cables vol. 2, box 261–62, Korea Country File, National Security File, LBJL.

40. *New York Times,* 14, 18, 20, 22, 23, 28, and 30 April; 1 and 15 May; 26 June; 13, 23, and 31 July; 14, 15, 20, 25, 27, 29, and 31 August; 3, 7, 20, 21, 26, and 28 September; 5, 8, 13, 18, 20, 26, and 29 October; 5 November 1968.

41. Bonesteel oral history, 332–34, 336–39, USAMHI; Jenerette, "The Forgotten DMZ," 40–41.

42. *New York Times,* 8 and 25 April; 21, 24, and 26 May; 6 June; 13, 22, and 27 July; 11 August; 1 September 1969.

Navy EC-121 electronic reconnaissance aircraft off the east coast, killing all thirty-one aboard. This attack caused the largest loss of American life in Korea since the end of the war in 1953. The plane was on a routine mission with orders to fly no closer than forty nautical miles to the North Korean coast; it was ninety miles away when it disappeared from radar screens. Nixon was informed about the attack that morning. In his memoirs, Henry A. Kissinger, the National Security Advisor, called it the first major crisis of the new administration. "We were being tested, and therefore force must be met with force," Nixon declared. Given the rhetoric of the 1968 presidential election, White House Chief of Staff H. R. "Bob" Haldeman noted in his diary that the "P[resident] almost has to retaliate in some fairly strong fashion."[43]

Haldeman's diary makes it clear that the issue dominated the next two days. Kissinger contends that the administration considered how to react to the downing of the plane at a "leisurely pace," which was another carryover from campaign speeches. Nixon had blasted Johnson for his crisis mentality, charging that he thought he could manage world affairs from the Situation Room in the White House basement. Nixon, on the other hand, claims he delayed, hoping that someone, even the North Koreans, might rescue some survivors.[44]

Two factions quickly developed in the administration over how to respond. Kissinger, his staff, Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, Haldeman, and Nixon formed one group that favored military retaliation. Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird opposed this option, advised caution, and suggested—oblivious of events of the past two and a half years—that the downing might be an isolated incident. The options that emerged were either to launch a retaliatory strike against North Korean air bases, or to continue the reconnaissance flights with armed escort. "Neither option was ideal," Nixon admitted. Other responses such as bombing Cambodia or making a simple protest were quickly ruled out. On 16 April, after two long meetings of the NSC, Haldeman recorded in his diary: "Probably will bomb the North Korean airfield." The ramifications of any decision were quite high. Haldeman and Kissinger believed a show of strength would galvanize the public and impress foreign officials with American resolve, making it easier to negotiate an agreement to end the war in Vietnam. The White House Chief of

43. Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 382–83; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 313–16; 16 April 1969 entry, H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House—The Complete Multimedia Edition* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Sony Electronic Publishing, 1994).

44. Nixon, *RN,* 382–83; Kissinger, *White House Years,* 313–19; 16 and 17 April 1969 entries, Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries.*

The North Korean attack on the EC-121 grabbed the attention of the U.S. public, but as this cartoon shows many individuals had little awareness that the incident was part of a larger confrontation on the peninsula. (Paul Conrad in the *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1969. Copyright, 1969, Los Angeles Times Syndicate. Reprinted by permission.)

Staff also admitted that the strike was extremely risky and could easily result in a second Korean war.[45]

A previously scheduled press conference for Friday, 18 April, was the deadline for a decision. Korea dominated the event. In the course of the conference, Nixon announced, "I have today ordered that these flights

45. Nixon, *RN*, 382–84; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 313–19; 16 and 17 April 1969 entries, Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*.

be continued. They will be protected. This is not a threat; it is simply a statement of fact."[46]

Even after the press conference, Nixon continued to consider a retaliatory strike. After the press conference and some ceremonial duties in the White House Rose Garden, the President talked individually with Kissinger and Haldeman. According to his Chief of Staff, Nixon weighed alternatives and considered the ramifications of a retaliation. "No decision, but I'd bet now against Korea strike, reversal of last night's view," Haldeman noted. Kissinger privately polled Rogers, Laird, and Richard M. Helms, director of the CIA. All three opposed an attack. A meeting on Saturday resolved the issue. After Rogers and Laird said they would quit if Nixon bombed North Korea, the President relented. In private, he railed against Rogers, Laird, and Helms, threatening to replace them at the first opportunity. For the time being, though, all he could do was order a carrier task force to sail off the eastern coast of North Korea as a show of force.[47]

Nixon retained ambiguous feelings about his decision. He realized he had few options: "As long as we were involved in Vietnam, we simply did not have the resources or public support for another war in another place." Nevertheless, Nixon could never stomach the fact that he had few choices. He remarked to Kissinger: "They got away with it this time, but they'll never get away with it again." He later told General Alexander M. Haig that his handling of the crisis "was the most serious misjudgment of my Presidency, including Watergate."[48]

The downing of the EC-121 was the last major incident of the Quiet War. The North Koreans shot down an American helicopter in August and held the crew captive for three and a half months, but raids across the DMZ began to fade in number. The North Koreans ended the Quiet War for the same mysterious reasons they started the conflict. In 1970 the Nixon administration believed the peninsula was secure enough to remove the 7th Infantry Division, and informed the South Korean government of such an intention in July. The withdrawal started in 1971. The next year, after some American prodding, the two Koreas began holding talks on unification. Although the promise of these years would prove deceptive and false, the DMZ in the early years of the new decade was no longer the site of regular armed confrontations between small

46. Nixon, *RN*, 383–84; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 317–19.

47. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 320–21; 17 and 18 April 1969; 4 May 1972 entries, Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*.

48. Nixon, *RN*, 384; interview with Alexander Haig, 14 January 1986, quoted in Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 31; 4 May 1972 entry, Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*; *New York Times*, 8 and 25 April; 21, 24 and 26 May; 6 June; 13, 22, and 27 July; 11 August; 1 September 1969.

units. Moments of crisis would visit the Korean peninsula again and again in the following decades, but these dangerous encounters were different from the Quiet War, involving neither intelligence operations or fears of another northern invasion. In neither type of incident were the fatalities as extensive as those suffered during the Quiet War.[49]

Americans had every reason to be grateful when the Quiet War ended. The North Korean raids had strained the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea and threatened to explode into a full-fledged crisis, or even a second Korean war. The motivation for the incursions remains unclear, although it seems that the North hoped to use the attacks to induce an insurrection in the South. While the reasons for this undeclared border war remain uncertain, the impact of these military confrontations is quite clear. The raids forced South Korea to cancel plans to send another ROK Army division to Vietnam at a critical juncture in that conflict, complicating even further a confusing war for the United States. This fact highlights a basic truth about coalition warfare—no matter how close the relationship, nations have differing reasons for entering into an alliance and these reasons can often be at odds with the interests of their partners. Events in Korea during the late 1960s certainly prove this point.

49. *Philadelphia Inquirer,* 3 December 1969; John K. Singlaub with Malcolm McConnell, *Hazardous Duty: An American Soldier in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Summit, 1991), 359–60; 29 October 1972 entry, Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*; *New York Times,* 8 and 25 April; 21, 24, and 26 May; 6 June; 13, 22, and 27 July; 11 August; 1 September 1969; 9 July 1970; Baltimore *Sun,* 14 August 1972; *U.S. News and World Report,* 17 July 1972; *San Diego Union,* 1 July 1972; *Time,* 17 July 1972. For an extensive study of these later confrontations, see Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1997). At the end of his study, Bolger notes that the United States has participated in a number of military engagements since 1945. Only the Vietnam War lasted longer than the Quiet War, and the fatalities of this confrontation rank fourth for this period behind the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the American intervention in Lebanon. For a comparison of the casualties between the Quiet War and the later skirmishes, see Bolger, *Unfinished War,* 112, 125.