

The Forgotten US Forever War in Korea

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Abstract: *The Korean War remains conspicuously absent from assertions by the US that it is done with forever wars, but the war remains a fact of life that Koreans live with every day. It continues in other ways too.*

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[U.S. President Joe Biden recently declared](#) that “for the first time in 20 years, the United States is not at war. We’ve turned the page.” “And as we close this period of relentless war,” he continued, “we’re opening a new era of relentless diplomacy.”

Was that [the end-of-war declaration that South Korean President Moon Jae-in was waiting to hear?](#)

When Biden made his solemn proclamation at the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 2021, he was referring to the end of the US war in Afghanistan. Since the US military has withdrawn from Afghanistan, Biden reasoned, the US is no longer at war. The Biden administration had already declared it would bring an end to “forever wars” in its [national security strategy](#). That included the 20-year war in Afghanistan, “the longest war in US history” by the administration’s count.

The Korean War, which has technically lasted for 70 years, didn’t appear on the list of forever wars. Despite Biden’s promise to end forever wars, the end of the Korean War was not mentioned anywhere in his national security strategy. For Biden, the Korean War doesn’t exist. Nor is it part of his national security strategy to end it. Considering that the war is not even referred to in his national security strategy, Biden is at least being logical that he does not need to mention the need to end it.

The day after Biden spoke at the UN, New York Times reporter Mark Mazzetti skewered the president’s speech.¹ Mazzetti observed that Biden may have pulled troops out of

Afghanistan, but he hasn't ended America's wars, not even in the Middle East. Just one day earlier, an American drone fired a missile at al-Qaeda forces in Syria. Three weeks before that, the US dropped bombs on the al-Shabab militant group in Somalia. There are still 2,500 American troops in Iraq and 900 in Syria. More than 40,000 American troops are carrying out operations in the Middle East. Biden himself has declared that the US can exercise military power whenever it deems necessary, including Afghanistan.

Mazzetti was right. The US remains at war on multiple fronts. But Mazzetti also got it wrong. He mentioned several countries where the US is waging war, but the Korean War was absent from his list as well. The US has been at war with North Korea since 1950. It continues to station troops in South Korea as part of that war, and not long ago, it carried out a joint military exercise with the South Korean military. And it continues to impose far-reaching economic and political sanctions on North Korea.²

Mazzetti's not the only one to make that mistake. Andrew Bacevich is another, despite being critical of American military interventions in other countries. A West Point graduate and former officer in the US military, Bacevich, now the President of the Quincy Institute, spoke out against President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. In various books he has recounted American military interventions in numerous places since World War II, describing these as "forever wars."³ He conceptualized what he calls the "Washington rules" that bind the US to perpetual warfare.⁴

But even Bacevich makes only a few passing references to the Korean War and does not pay due attention to the war that played a decisive role in establishing those "rules." The Korean War reversed the precipitous fall of the US defense budget after World War II. The budget has never returned to the pre-war level since. The future of NATO was in doubt until the Korean War, which solidified it as a military alliance. Japan, which had been occupied since its defeat in World War II, regained its independence and formed an alliance with the U.S. during the Korean War under the US-Japan Security Treaty. Robert Jervis makes a prescient observation that "it took the Korean War to bring about the policies that we associate with the cold war" although he could not have anticipated, in 1980 when he wrote his analysis, that many of these policies including high defense budgets would remain in place long after the end of the cold war.⁵

While John Ikenberry describes the postwar order established by the US as the "liberal international order," it would be more appropriate to call it a realist international order based on power, as John Mearsheimer argues.⁶ That defense budget, that military power, those alliances, and that international order are still in effect today with a hefty increase in the first Biden defense budget and a focus on China and the Asia-Pacific. Even if these corner stones of the postwar international order can all be traced back to the Korean War, neither liberal Ikenberry nor neorealist Mearsheimer mentions the historical origin. And none of the analysts mentioned above talks about the fact that the Korean War has never ended.

The Korean War is no longer part of American public discourse: There's no need to declare the end of a nonexistent war. In this manner, the US is able to quietly maintain the world order. Is it possible that part of the "Washington rules" was perhaps inadvertently betrayed by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Mark Lambert recently? When asked about an end-of-war declaration in a virtual symposium organized by the Institute for Korean-American Studies on September 23, Lambert said the US didn't want to give North Korea a

wrong impression. “Our concern is that we not give a false narrative to the North that in any way shape or form, that would jeopardize our troop presence in South Korea or the ROK-US alliance.”⁷



President Moon Jae-in speaking at the UN General Assembly, September 2021.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in brought up an end-of-war declaration shortly after Biden’s speech at the UN. Could that speech contribute to pressuring the US to end its silence on the Korean War? Or would it take another round of North Korea’s missile or nuclear tests, or worse, to awaken the Americans to the reality of the war that they have been waging in a distant place?

As it happened, Private (Pfc.) Kim Seok-joo returned to Korea the same day, after 71 years away.⁸ More precisely, Kim’s remains were repatriated that day. He had been killed during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War and had been left buried—or might have been just left—there until his remains were excavated and sent to Hawaii for identification. From there, his remains were carried home by Second Lieutenant Kim Hye-soo, his great-granddaughter who now serves in the South’s military as a nursing officer.

So continues the war on the Korean Peninsula, down through the generations.

The war continues in other ways too. The Battle of Chosin Reservoir was resurrected as the “Battle at Lake Changjin” (长津湖) on screens in China during its Golden Week, becoming an instant blockbuster with more than \$670 million ticket sales within the first two weeks, [according to Maoyan](#). The movie portrays the battle as heroic sacrifices made by Chinese volunteers to deal a humiliating defeat to American soldiers, then the world’s most invincible, and deliver an unvarnished triumph to the newly-born People’s Republic of China. [The New York Times](#) sensed “defiant and jingoistic” sentiments, characterizing it as “a lavishly choreographed call to arms at a time of global crisis and increasingly tense relations with the world, especially the United States.” [The Global Times of China says](#) as much, from a Chinese perspective. “The national feeling displayed in the film echoes the rising public sentiment in safeguarding national interests in front of provocations, which has great implications for today’s China-U. S. competition.” Thus the war repeats itself, the second time as a film—full of potential to explode into a disastrous third.

During the active phase of the war, General MacArthur kept his headquarters in Tokyo, using several bases in Japan as his staging ground from which to project American forces into the Korean peninsula. The U.S. managed to keep its unhindered access to at least some of them by creating the United Nations Command-Rear in Japan in 1957 when the headquarters moved to Yongsan. It now keeps seven bases ready for use in contingencies, apparently without the requirement to seek prior Japanese approval: (Ground component) Camp Zama; (Air component) Yokota Air Base, Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Kadena Air Base; and (Naval component) Sasebo Naval Base, White Beach Naval Base, and Yokosuka Naval Base.⁹ Michael Bosack, former Deputy Chief of Government Relations at Headquarters, U.S. Forces, Japan, notes that this arrangement offers “notable opportunities for the Japanese government to advance its operational and strategic interests.”¹⁰ These opportunities include, according to him, expanding UN-designated bases in Japan, increasing Japanese participation in UNC exercises, and inviting international partners for military exercises in Japan. The war thus continues in Japan too, with opportunities to grow.



UNC and UNC-R officers pictured during a 2018 UNC-R change of command ceremony. In the background are the flags of the United States, Japan, Australia, United Nations, as well as General Brooks' position standard.

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Notes

¹ Mark Mazzetti, "[Biden Declared the War Over. But Wars Go On.](#)" The New York Times, September 22, 2021.

² For a comprehensive, though somewhat outdated, overview of U.S. sanctions, see Dianne E. Rennack, [North Korea: Legislative Basis for U.S. Economic Sanctions, Congressional Research Service](#), April 25, 2011. For an analysis of the sanctions' impacts on human lives, see [The Human Costs and Gendered Impact of Sanctions on North Korea](#) (October 2019).

³ Bacevich, Andrew J. *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*. Updated edition. ed. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Bacevich, A. J., and Efraim Inbar, eds. *The Gulf War of 1991 Reconsidered*. London; Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003.

⁴ Bacevich, Andrew J. *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*. 1st ed. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

⁵ Robert Jervis. "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, no. 4 (December 1, 1980): 563-92.

⁶ Ikenberry, G. John. "The Liberal International Order and Its Discontents." *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 509-21; and ——. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. John J. Mearsheimer; Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order. *International Security* 2019; 43 (4): 7-50.

⁷ 김정은, "북-미 정상회담 '성공, 한반도 평화 실현 기대'" VOA 뉴스, 2021.9.25.

⁸ "[Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Joint Repatriation Ceremony between Republic of Korea and United States of America.](#)" September 23, 2021.

⁹ Harrison, Selig S. *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 164.

¹⁰ Michael Bosack, "[Relevance Despite Obscurity: Japan and UN Command](#)," *Tokyo Review*, February 1, 2018.

Featured image: President Biden speaking at the United Nations General Assembly. September 21, 2021. (Source: APJFF)

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