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# A South Asian neutral power in the United Nations: India's peacekeeping mission on the Korean peninsula (1947–1955)

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The end of World War II (1939–1945) by Germany's (May 8) and Japan's surrender (August 15) brought a major socio-political transformation in the colonised nations of Asia. The independence of the Korean Peninsula from the Japanese imperialism was not smoothly implemented for a peaceful settlement. Rather, the ideological camps of communism (=socialism) and democracy (=capitalism) dominated in the region, which became the hub of the Cold War in the late 1940s and the 1950s. The local citizens confronted the political conflict for the unified Korea. The US allied with the UN, turning against North Korea and its socialist allies. Meantime, India emerged in the UN for the Korean issues. Then, how did India, the new international leader, involve the process of the post-colonial unification (1948–1950) with the major powers (the US, the Soviet Union, China and the UK)? What about the position of India during the Korean War (1950–53)? How can one interpret India's policy on the POW repatriation issue (1953–1955)? This paper explores the non-military initiatives of the South Asian country as a 'neutral power' through the cases of India's authority within the United Nations (Temporary) Commission on Korea (UN(T)COK), the 60th Parachute Field Ambulance (PFA), and Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) and Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC). This paper argues that the soft diplomacy of India strategically established the foundation of a peacekeeping mission on the Korean Peninsula (1947–1955) even though the politico-historical relationship with the Soviet Union and China frequently caused serious misunderstands for South Korea.

*After all, India was not even three years old at the outbreak of the conflict (Korean War). It also had extremely difficult domestic problems, a hostile Pakistan on its flanks and the People's Republic of China (PRC)—a potential threat ... Still, India was the largest and most vocal Third World country not embedded in the emerging Cold War alliance structure, with Nehru the champion of anti-imperialism and neutralism (Barnes, 2013b, p. 265)*

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## Introduction

The India–Korea relationship, according to the oldest extant text of *Samguk Yusa* (三國遺事, written in the 1280s),<sup>1</sup> is likely to have been established in the legendary era of Indian Ayuta (or the kingdom of Ayodhya), when Princess Hwang-Ok Heo (known in India as Suriratna (or Sembavalam, 許黃玉, 32–188 AD and, supposedly, 157 years old) moved to Geumgwan Gaya (金官伽倻, or Garakguk 麗洛國, 42 AD–532 AD) in 48 AD and went on to be crowned the queen of the Korean kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have any official record afterward over 2000 years. The mystical relationship between the two countries was then re-established during the decolonisation process of modern Asia. As India socio-politically concerned about the East Asian region, the personal contacts between Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Korean students and So-ang Cho (shadow Foreign Minister of the Provisional Korean Government in Exile) indirectly provided hope to the Korean people (colonists) during the first two decades of the 20th century (Tayal, 2014, pp. 17–21). The Indian National Congress in 1942 also expressed its desire to see Korea free from the colonial yoke. Korea then attained independence from Japan in 1945, while India won its independence from the British Indian Empire (1947) under the nationalist movement of ‘nonviolent resistance.’ The leadership of India adopted a neutral policy of international diplomacy, resolving to maintain amicable relations with any influential nation (Tiwari, 1988, pp. 14–15).

In this scenario, how did the interim Government of India become embroiled in the geopolitical issue of East Asia, particularly those pertaining to the Korean peninsula and its internecine war? The foreign policy by Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), the first prime minister of India (1947–64), supported decolonisation and anti-imperialism in Asia and Africa (Rothermund, 2000; Kumar, 2015, pp. 182–184; Ankit, 2015, pp. 574–576). The basic principle of diplomacy, according to Tao and Li, is to “meet the demands of domestic and international situations, to preserve regional and global peace and to ensure its highest diplomatic goal of state security” (Tao and Li, 2010, p. 118; Zhang, 2007, pp. 108–122). Although the neutral position of India often encountered opposition, misapprehension, intimidation and offence at various junctures (Tayal, 2014, pp. 49–51), India’s three peacekeeping commitments of the United Nations (Temporary) Commission on Korea (UN(T)COK) (1947–50), the Korean War (1950–53) and the POW Repatriation project (1953–55) on the Korean peninsula demonstrated the diplomatic nature of the South Asian nation as an alternative power in the global community of the UN.

## Peacekeeping in post-colonial Korea (1947–50)

Independent Korea (August 15, 1945) was unfortunately administered by the United Nations Trusteeship Council (UNTC). When Korea had the status of a foreign military trusteeship (1945–48) by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), India hosted the Asian Relations Conference, a non-political initiative in New Delhi, to which three Korean representatives attended: Dr. Rak-geon Baek (Choson Christian University), Kyung-duk Har (*Seoul Daily News*) and Chang-gyeong Go (the Women’s Bureau of the Allied Military Government) (Tayal, 2014, pp. 13–14; Kumar, 2015, pp. 184–186). India there called for Korea’s independence, with Nehru particularly asserting that “the countries of Asia can no longer be used as pawns by others; they are bound to have their own policies in world affairs” (Kumar, 2015, p. 184).<sup>3</sup>

Afterwards, when the US laid a motion to discuss Korean Independence in the United National General Assembly (UNGA), the newly emergent India participated in the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) as a

peacekeeper and was eventually selected as the chairman nation (Thakur, 2013, pp. 273–298; Kim, 2010, pp. 23–25; Jung, 2009, pp. 395–401).<sup>4</sup> Here, the diplomatic influence of India, previously demonstrated at the Asian Relations Conference, cannot be overlooked. Ankit maintained the effort that “India’s role as a ‘wise friend,’ along with an emphasis on Asian resurgence, allowed New Delhi to play a mediatory role in the UN” (Ankit, 2015, p. 587). Since September 1947 marked the first anniversary of India’s independence from the British (Ankit, 2016, pp. 22–44), India’s leadership of the UNTCOK was the first opportunity for the Nehru administration to apply its neutrality policy as a global peacekeeping promoter. A statement by Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit—an Indian diplomat, the eighth President of the UNGA and Prime Minister Nehru’s sister—outlined India’s political philosophy:

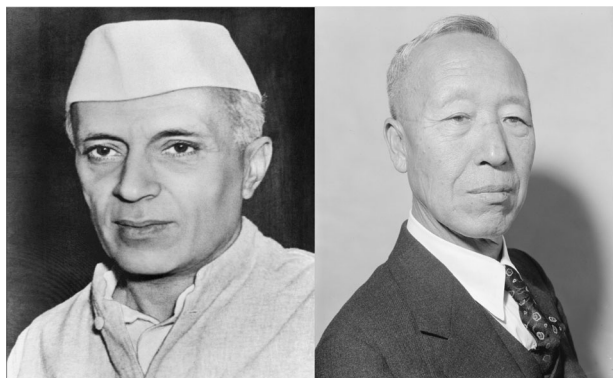
Looming ominously over the whole situation [of Korea]... the great powers, instead of coming closer together, are drifting farther apart. We, in India, on our part, are aware of no compulsion to identify ourselves wholly, or to associate ourselves systematically, with either or any of the different groups... On the contrary, we consider it of paramount importance that the distance between them should be narrowed down. We believe that our conduct should conduct to that end.<sup>5</sup>

The initial intent was to encourage and observe a free national election for Koreans as part of decolonisation. The political reasons offered by Nehru at the UNTCOK, according to Tiwari, were interpreted from four perspectives: (1) if the settlement process of Korea was drawn out, it would cause a Third World War that might affect India’s neutral status; (2) it was an opportunity for India to prove the effectiveness of its new international policy; (3) Nehru himself wished to witness or experience the practicability and shortcoming of the policy; (4) Korea, as an Asian member, was an immediate test case for Nehru’s ‘Asianism (=Asian-centric ideology)’ (Tiwari, 1988, pp. 15–16). Tayal additionally assumed that India’s neutrality policy in relation to the Korea issue was driven by the fact that India itself had been in the same position of fighting external powers during the independence period (Tayal, 2014, pp. 50–51).<sup>6</sup>

No North or South Korean representatives were formerly invited to address the UN at that time (Tayal, 2014, p. 23).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, based on India’s proposal, the US and USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or Soviet Union) proposed two different resolutions. The US suggested that Korea hold an election in the two separate zones under the respective supervision of external forces. Korea would then create its own national security forces before the foreign troops withdrew. The UN sets up the UNTCOK to supervise this process (Campbel, 2014). The USSR’s resolution was less detailed, focusing on an independent effort by Koreans to occur after the US and USSR forces withdrew (Kim, 1989, pp. 185–187; Campbel, 2014, pp. 1–29).<sup>8</sup> Kyungsoo Kim assumed that the North organisation was better structured than the South, which encouraged the USSR but caused the Americans to hesitate (Kim, 1989). India, as the chair of the UNTCOK, rejected both proposals at the 94th Meeting of the First Committee, instead putting forward a modification of the US plan wherein a single election would be held on a national basis under the supervision of the UNTCOK (Mishra, 1964, pp. 145–146). The speech by K.P.S. Menon (1898–1982) explained India’s peacekeeping perspective: “Our commission does not recognise the 38th parallel. It is only interested in it as a political anomaly and must be removed. In our eyes, Korea is one and indivisible.”<sup>9</sup> The direct involvement of the UNTCOK, unsupported by the Soviet Union, led to the failure of the UN organisation’s initial plan for Korea (Thakur, 2013, p. 276; Kim, 2010, pp. 22–24).<sup>10</sup>

Although also opposed by Canada and Australia, the US proposal of a separate election and recognition of the government in the southern part of Korea was approved by the Interim Committee without the agreement of the USSR and their bloc nations. K.P.S. Menon, the Indian chairman of the UNTCOK, did not initially consent to the US idea but he eventually supported the US resolution (Tayal, 2014, pp. 24–26; Dhawan, 2020, pp. 139–140).<sup>11</sup> The fact that Menon was Indian Ambassador to the Republic of China before 1948 was an indirect reminder about India's caution if a rationale about India's reluctance to make a final decision in favour of the US method is needed.<sup>12</sup> Tayal held that the recognition of Korea would have strained India's relationship with Communist China and that the involvement of India in the decision-making process would create more unfriendly States around their border (Tayal, 2014, pp. 53–54).<sup>13</sup> However, to the contrary, Jung disclosed a diplomatic endeavour (=lobby) by Chough Pyung-ok (1894–1960), the envoy of the Republic of Korea (ROK) to the UN in 1948, in a personal testimony that Korea had to persuade India, who was a new power on the Korean peninsula issue, to support it (Jung, 2009, pp. 396–398) (Fig. 1).

India acted as a mediator, but two opposing regimes eventually emerged in the Korean peninsula. South Korea declared legal legitimacy based on the mandate of the UN resolution (November 14, 1947) of August 15, 1948, while North Korea conducted elections for the Supreme People's Assembly on September 9, 1948 with just one candidate (Il-sung Kim, 1912–1994) (Thakur, 2013, pp. 276–277). Motilal Chimanlal Setalvad (ca.1884–1974), the Indian delegate for the UNGA, stated that India accepted separate elections but would have preferred if the elected leader of South Korea had held discussions with the political leader of North Korea for an all-Korean government (Mishra, 1964, p. 146). However, Syngman Rhee (the first president of South Korea) refused this political overture from India. Most South Koreans did not entirely grasp the different systems (Communism and Republicanism) and were puzzled by India's suggestion, even believing that India had a pro-communist policy (Ouellette, 2019, pp. 408–420).<sup>14</sup> Jung also noted that, while Koreans acknowledged India as an international leader for decolonisation, they still saw the multi-ethnic nation as less civilised (Jung, 2009, pp. 402–408). The chaotic and violent division of India and Pakistan in 1947 was perceived by Koreans as a feature of Indian politics, rather than an exception (Jung, 2009, pp. 370–375).



**Fig. 1** Jawaharlal Nehru and Syngman Rhee. Jawaharlal Nehru is the first prime minister of India (1947–64). Syngman Rhee was the first President of the Republic of South Korea. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Wikipedia and Britannica; copyright © Wikipedia and Britannica, all rights reserved.

When the United Nations Commission on Korea (UNCOK) was created to mediate unification between the two Koreas, India chaired one of its subcommittees. Anup Singh (1917–2003), the Indian representative, focused his efforts on bringing the North Korean regime to the table. India's ultimate goal was peace for Korea through the unification of both sides (Kim, 2010, pp. 25–26). The recognition of the ROK and the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) also bolstered India's neutral status. When the ECAFE lobbied for associate membership in the ROK, India reluctantly supported the resolution:

The existence of the Government of South Korea exercising authority not over the whole of Korea but over the southern part of Korea only can not be ignored, but we were not bound to enter into any political or diplomatic relations with that Government or give it formal recognition in any other way.<sup>15</sup>

When the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) asserted that India could object to associate membership with the Government of South Korea, the Soviet Bloc argued that Korea was not responsible for its own relations. India at that time did not accept the USSA's claim. India supported the amendment of the relevant rules over South Korea's ECAFE associate membership; however did not make any public statement on the matter (Tayal, 2014, pp.54–55).

India's neutrality became problematic when North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950. The war news was delivered to the UN by the UNCOK, but was rejected for consideration by the UN delegates of the UK, France, India, Egypt, Norway, Indonesia, Turkey and Australia because of negative phrasing 'act of aggression' in the American draft resolution (Roy, 1993, pp. 117–118). Trigve Lie (1896–1968), the UN Secretary-General, discussed the issue with the delegates from India, Egypt and Norway (Roy, 1993, pp. 120–121). Then, when Resolution 82 (1950), which mandated that North Korea should withdraw to the 38th Parallel, was put to vote, B.N. Rau (1887–1953), president of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Indian representative at the UN (1950–52), voted in favour of the resolution, while the Soviet Union was absent and Egypt abstained (Roy, 1993, pp. 126–127; Thakur, 2013, pp. 276–277; Kumar, 2015, pp. 185–187).<sup>16</sup> Singh Kondapi, the Indian delegate to the UN Commission on Korea, was in South Korea at that time and he reported that North Korea's invasion was a planned manoeuvre (Tayal, 2014, pp. 27–28; Kim, 1989, pp. 189–192).<sup>17</sup> However, India (Delhi) opposed Rau's decision, which did not get official support from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Rau's vote was eventually endorsed by the MEA; however, he was instructed to consult with Delhi on all UN votes (Thakur, 2013, p. 277). Meanwhile, Rau in an informal meeting with other UN delegates proposed that a meeting for the heads of State, including American President Harry S. Truman (1884–1972) and USSR premier Joseph V. Stalin (1878–1953), would be advantageous since the military condition in the Korean peninsula would worsen over the next few days (Roy, 1993, pp. 120–121).

When the second resolution (83) calling on member states of the UN to give military assistance to South Korea was laid, Rau abstained from the vote because he had failed to communicate with Nehru about India's decision. It later became known that the Indian Cabinet in Delhi had spent two days discussing India's position in Korean War (June 28–29) and that a decision had been made to endorse the second resolution (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 49–77). Nevertheless, the Cabinet still believed that the cooperation of the big powers (the Soviet Union and China) was indispensable for any solution (Mishra, 1964, pp. 148–149). Nehru sent personal letters to George C. Marshall (1880–1959), Stalin and Dean Acheson (1893–1971) on July 12, 1950, asking



**Fig. 2 The 60th Parachute Field Ambulance during the Korean War.** The Indian medical unit saved hundreds of lives of UN and communist forces by which the nickname 'The Maroon Angels' was given to them. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Korea Cultural Center, India; copyright © Reddit, all rights reserved.

them to break the deadlock in the Security Council. The Soviet Union agreed to a peaceful and permanent solution for Korea (Roy, 1993, pp. 130–134). The American President also offered his support; however, the initiative eventually foundered because the US did not want China (PRC: Peoples Republic of China) in the UN.<sup>18</sup> The failure not only disappointed India, a UN peacekeeper for Korea but also resulted in both Koreas losing another chance for unification. Thus, although both sides of the leading powers were often sceptical about India's neutral policy, the country's philosophy can be seen as the diplomatic strategy of the South Asian power in the form of a political peacekeeper (Jojin, 2020). Misra maintained that the policy of the Nehru administration in the Korean crisis was consistent with other instances of Indian foreign policy toward any particular State (Mishra, 1964, pp. 145–151).

### Parachute Field Ambulance (PFA) in the Korean War (1950–53)

Although the strategic data of the Korean War varies according to the source, South Korea and UN allies dispatched about 2,752,000 soldiers. North Korea, with its communist supporters, had over 3,300,000 soldiers. As a result, South Korea's allies had high casualties at 759,000 victims: dead (170,900), missing (32,500) and wound (566,400). The North Korean allies had 1,229,000–1,757,000 victims: 398,000–926,000 (dead), 145,000+ (missing) and 686,500 (wound) (Cumings, 2011). The Korean peninsula had a higher rate of civilian casualties (approx. 2–3 million: 990,000 (South) and 1,550,000 (North)) than the Chinese Civil War (1 million: 1927–1949) and the Vietnam War (2 million: 1955–1975) (Kim and Yang, 2021).

The six other counties—Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Germany and India—sent medical aid, while 16 UN member state provided military support to South Korea (Bandoğlu, 2019, pp. 373–379).<sup>19</sup> Among the medical suppliers, the Northern European countries worked closely together to provide a station hospital (Sweden: *Seojeon Byungwon*), a hospital ship (Denmark: *Jutlandia*) and a MASH (Norway: *NORMASH* and 'Korea Sisters').<sup>20</sup> They also cooperated in a post-war project to set up Korea's public health system in the 1960s. Italy (a non-UN member) dispatched the 68th Red Cross hospital and a transport ship, while Germany (a major player in World War II) set up a non-military hospital at the end of the war in May 1953 (Kim and Yang, 2021).

What about India? How did the South Asian nation play during the Korean War? In this regard, when the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorised the establishment of the

United Nations Command (UNC) to contain North Korea, Rau (Indian representative at the UN) indicated that India would be sending military forces to the UNC for the Korean War, but this decision was modified by Nehru (prime minister of India: 1947–64) and V.K. Krishna Menon (his close friend) to the basic neutral policy by which they avoided the direct encounter of any (the Soviet Union or China) power bloc (Tayal, 2014, pp. 27–28). In detail, during the summer of 1950, the North forces steadily pushed back South Korea and its UN allies southwards. Colonel M.K. Unni Nayar (1911–1950, India's alternate representative of the UNCOK), along with two war correspondents (Ian Morrison from *The Times* and Christopher Buckley from the *Daily Telegraph*), were killed by a mine explosion in the combat area of Chilgok Waegwan (middle-south of South Korea) in August (Tayal, 2014, pp. 33–38). The only neutral Asian nation then decided to support the US-led UN forces from the moral foundation of medical aid (Tiwari, 1988, pp. 17–19).<sup>21</sup> The 60th Parachute Field Ambulance (PFA), an army medical unit was dispatched to Korea with 400,000 jute bags (169,000 pounds' worthy) and medical supplies (3950 pounds) 5 months after the War started in November 1950 (Thakur, 2013, p. 279; Dhawan, 2016, pp. 1–36). India's medical aid during the Korean War is often seen as a meaningless gesture from a political perspective; however, as a humanitarian gesture, the focus on war casualties represented their diplomatic philosophy of non-violence (Fig. 2).

The Indian Unit that was part of the Indian Airborne Division comprised 341 men, including 14 doctors (surgeons, anaesthetists, general practitioners and dentists), 17 officers and 40 trucks. The Unit that was formed in 1942 was a multi-ethnic group—Lushais of the Assam Hills, Sikhs of Punjab, South Indians, Bengalis and men from many other parts of India. They had been in the Second World War as medical personnel as well as being trained in the mountainous region of Kashmir for 18 months. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel A.G. Rangarai (a veteran of the Burma Campaign of World War II and the first Indian paratrooper), they were divided into two groups: the first 'Forward Element' group supported the 27th Commonwealth (British) Brigade, while the other 'Administrative Element' group was deployed at Taegu (대구).

As the war was not going well, the 'Forward Element' group had to relocate from Pyongyang (평양) to Uijongbu (의정부) 24 kilometers north of Seoul on December 14 (Kim, 2010, 26–29). The story of the Indian retreat famously made the unit known as the *Bucket Brigade* (양동이부대). Despite the unexpected order to retreat, the Indian unit found and was able to mobilise an abandoned train and a few wagons to transport patients and all

the medical equipment. The fuel (coal) for the train was replaced with water, with a human bucket brigade from the Daedong River, to get the steam engine running (Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, 2014). The bravery of the unit challenged the other UN allies in Seoul when they crossed the Han River with the patients just before the last battalion of their Commonwealth Brigade (Tayal, 2014, pp. 33–34). The winter of Korea (January 1951) was another tremendous challenge, along with the many casualties. As they relocated to Suwon (수원) about 70 km southeast of Seoul and Changhwon (장호원), Rangarai and his medical team carried out major operations with hardly a break for rest. Their reputation for humanitarian action was praised by wounded UN soldiers, including Australians (Tayal, 2014, pp. 34–35).

When they relocated to Yoju (여주) on January 25, 1951, the five army surgeons and seven medical soldiers joined the 187 US Airborne Regimental Combat Team for a parajump operation over the Munsan (문산) region behind enemy lines. A detachment of the Indian Field Ambulance was involved in another action where they joined several thousand paratroopers on March 23. The airlift, dubbed ‘Operation Tomahawk,’ was a successful joint operation between the 3rd and 8th US Army Divisions, despite a massive enemy offensive (Embassy of India, 2020). The Indian medics performed 103 emergency operations and saved the lives of 50 American soldiers. Afterward, they were redeployed to the 28th Commonwealth Brigade and, in early May, moved to Gapyeong (가평), an area east of Seoul. They continued to treat casualties evacuated from the frontline up to September. The participation of ‘Operation Commando’ was a great motivation for the First Commonwealth Brigade (58 lost and 262 wounded), while they themselves saw two medical soldiers killed and 14 injured (Institute for Military History, MND, 1998, pp. 431–432). It was reported that about 70 wounded soldiers were treated weekly at the Indian unit. The 627-strong unit, despite having three fatal and 23 non-fatal casualties, conducted 2300 operations and treated approximately 20,000 inpatients and 222,324 outpatients (Tayal, 2014, pp. 34–36; Embassy of India, 2020). The Indian government contributed 400,000 rice bags to Korea (Ministry of National Defence (Fallen Soldiers Edition Committee), 1980, pp. 782–783). The ‘Forward Element’ group also treated about 230 people near the frontline before the ceasefire agreement in July 1953. Their brave work boosted the morale of the UN troops. Those who benefited included not only UN and South Korean soldiers but also Chinese and North Korean POWs. Issues of colour, race and nationality were not their concern in the ‘merciful impartiality business’ of MASH medical diplomacy. Indeed, their maroon beret became a symbol of benevolence as they earned unique sobriquets, such as ‘Maroon Angels,’ ‘Airborne Angels’ and ‘Cheery Troopers.’

The ‘Administrative Element’ group (Daegu team of the 60th PFA), commanded by Major N.B. Banerjee, also had successful medical missions in relieving the suffering and disease of civilians. At the request of the UN medical authorities, they assisted the First Army Hospital and the West City Hospital. When the conflict intensified in February 1951, with casualty rates spiking, the Indian medical group helped the First Army Hospital, which was struggling with shortages of medical supplies, doctors, nurses, and other necessities (Tayal, 2014, pp. 34–36; Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 65–68). The First ROK Army Hospital was upgraded with additional support, including 30 trained men and four women doctors as surgeons and anaesthetists.

The local civilian hospital (the West City Hospital) was in such a poor state of hygiene that typhus and tuberculosis patients, according to Tayal, were warded with patients who had undergone surgery. Babies were also held in unsanitary premises. An improvised operation theatre marked the start of a re-

organisation of the system, followed by fresh food, scrubbed floors, more medical supplies and drugs (Tayal, 2014, p. 37). Afterward, the India unit performed 1400 serious operations in a year. They also opened an outdoor dispensary for the large number of outpatients who could not be admitted to the hospital. At the start of 1951, the hospital was seeing an average of 250–300 patients a day coming for treatment, totalling 50,000 patients in eight months (Tayal, 2014, p. 37). When 150 children were struggling with trachoma in an orphanage, the team isolated the patients and eliminated the disease with medicine supplied by the UN’s Japan headquarters in September 1952. Meanwhile, the headquarters of the 60th PFA lost one member of its medical staff and saw seven injured from field artillery and mortar attack by the communist Chinese army. Their medical dedication was officially recognised by the US Army and Korean Army, regardless of the politico-military debate.

### **Custodian Force India (CFI) and POW Repatriation (1953–55)**

India’s international role then became humanitarian as a neutral when the Korean War reached a stalemate. As China (with the Soviet Union) and the US negotiated an armistice agreement, India (represented by Krishna Menon) offered an innovative solution for the POW issue (a heated discussion that had been ongoing from December 1951 to June 1953) which, as Barnes argues, was one of the main causes<sup>22</sup> for a peaceful end of the war (Barnes, 2013a, pp. 78–87, Barnes, 2013b, pp. 263–286; Kim, 2019, pp. 186–217; Ranjan and Bharti, 2021, pp. 39–69). Asian and Latin American countries, followed by Canada, Australia, France and Britain, supported the Indian proposal to pressure the two superpowers to endorse it (Kim, 2019, pp. 218–223; Thakur, 2013, pp. 289–292; Barnes, 2010, pp. 231–253; Bandoğlu, 2019, pp. 374–375).<sup>23</sup> Here Tiwari speculated that the lengthy debate on the ceasefire agreement would not be as beneficial for India’s political interests as remaining neutral would be (Tiwari, 1988, pp. 19–22). Eventually, a compromise was reached on the method of prisoner exchange, with those POWs who wished to go home being returned to their families while the remaining POWs were sent to a neutral nation (Joon, 2020, pp. 237–241).

The Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) was formed, according to the Geneva Convention of 1949, to manage the exchange of POWs on July 27, 1953. The united members of Czechoslovakia (with personnel of 300), Poland (300), Sweden (75) and Switzerland (96) selected India as the head and ‘umpire’ of the new UN organisation (Thakur, 2013, pp. 289–292; Yang, 2019, pp. 221–253). The NNRC’s terms of reference stated that the prisoners who refused to go home would be granted civilian status in a neutral nation where they wished to live. The Red Cross Society of India was invited to take part in the process (Thakur, 2013, pp. 294–296). Nehru, SSP Thorat, B.S. Puri (Head of the Indian Red Cross), one army surgeon and three staff officers arrived in Korea, representing the Indian government (Park, 2014, pp. 113–141).<sup>24</sup> The 190 Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier Rajinder Singh Paintal, was deputised to establish the central forces. The Custodian Force India (CFI), with 5230 personnel, was then dispatched to Korea under the leadership of Major General Thorat in September 1953 (Tayal, 2014, pp. 39–44).<sup>25</sup> The 60th PFA also emerged with the CFI to treat North Korean, and Chinese POWs, as well as civilian casualties (Fig. 3).

At the same time, as part of the truce, another UN commission called the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) was set up as the custodian force to control the POWs (Ban, 2020, pp. 349–368; Feng, 2015, pp. 153–159). The UN had selected two neutral member states, Sweden and Switzerland, where China recommended the People’s Republics of Poland and



**Fig. 3 the NNRC and POWs arriving in India.** Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru suggested to build the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) at the United Nations. As a result, Korean War POWs, who refused to return to their country, arrived in India before sending off to a third nation under the supervision of India. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of better India and Brill; copyright © Richen Norbu Wangchuk and David Cheng Chang, all rights reserved.

Czechoslovakia, which were communist countries (Gnoinska, 2012, pp. 293–320; Kim, 2018, pp. 119–133; Harder, 2021, pp. 1227–1267). India was again selected to chair the commission, represented by the Indian Army Major General K.S. Thimayya, with P.N. Haksar and Bahadur Singh as political advisers (Bhagat, 1952, pp. 5–21).<sup>26</sup> They were deeply involved in ‘Operation Big Switch’ in which the UNC handed over 75,823 prisoners (Barnes, 2013a, pp. 83–85; Joon, 2020, pp. 239–252).<sup>27</sup> The PVA (China: People’s Volunteer Army) and KPA (the North Korean People’s Army) repatriated 12,773 UNC POWs.<sup>28</sup> During the latter half of 1953, the NNRC and NNSC, under the leadership of India, worked together closely to ensure the human rights of POWs were defended.

The repatriation of the prisoners was, nonetheless, an uneasy process since both sides were not always satisfied with the arrangements or strategically blocked each other. The Indian Custodial Force was also seen by South Korea as a threat to the anti-communist POWs. For this, Nehru was not happy with the political attitude of Syngman Rhee, saying: “the recent developments connected with the activities of President Syngman Rhee ... should make the United Nations and every country connected with it of the undesirability of any kind of association with a person like President Rhee (a statement at the House of the People (Indian Parliament) on June 12, 1952)” (Tayal, 2014, p. 62). The tension continued even after the 1953 Armistice. For example, when the CFI arrived in Incheon harbour, the South Korean government did not allow them to step onto Korean soil. The UNC thus had to use the US helicopters to transport the CFI personnel to the 38th parallel region (판문점, Panmunjom).<sup>29</sup> India also announced that they would be using their 20 air-force planes and four civilian aircraft, as well as four US sky trucks (Park, 2014, pp. 117–119). India was not also invited to the Political Conference on the Korean issue in Geneva in April 1954 because of objections from the Rhee administration and intensification of Cold War rivalry (Jojin, 2020).<sup>30</sup>

After many twists and turns, the NNRC stationed in the region of the 38th parallel to conduct their mission over four months (120 days). As the second official act of ‘Operation Big Switch,’ the UNC, on September 23, 1953, handed 7900 North Korean POWs and 14,704 Chinese POWs over to the CFI. North Korea and their communist allies transferred 335 South Koreans, 23 Americans and one Briton (Chae, 2017, pp. 128–159). There were unpredictable protests and violence between North Korean

POWs and anti-communist POWs (South Koreans and some North Koreans). Rhee also suggested that 25,000 ‘non-repatriate’ North Korean POWs be released (Chae, 2017, pp. 128–133). The CFI, which was in charge of repatriation, located 22, 604 UNC POWs on the south side of the 38th parallel, while the North Korean POWs were on the north side of the demilitarised zone (DMZ) (Chang, 2020a, pp. 215–220). The prison camp was comprised of two South Korean concentration camps, three Chinese concentration camps, one camp for those who wanted to return home and one medical camp. In one instance, SSP Thorat (CFI commander) and H. S. Grewal (the commander of a prisoner-of-war camp) were taken into custody by the anti-communist POWs in early October 1953 for disruptive behaviour.

The NNRC representatives of Czechoslovakia and Poland were also attacked by the same anti-communist POWs. During the process, the aggressive actions of the POWs, exacerbated by cultural and language misunderstandings of the CFI, led to two major shooting incidents at Dong Lipo camp, leaving three or four people dead and 10–15 injured (Park, 2014, pp. 122–124; Seon, 2019, pp. 329–366). The POWs riots became a national issue for South Korean citizens and politicians. Since some of the victims were anti-communist Chinese POWs, Taiwan (the Kuomintang of the Republic of China, 國民黨) also had public protests over the POW issue with over 100,000 people taking to the streets, along with overseas Chinese people living in Korea (approx. 20,000) (Park, 2014, pp. 128–131). Socio-politically, India was forced into a corner, but South Korea and the US still had to adhere to the UN policy of the NNRC over the controversial issue of the POWs.

Two trials were also held at the POW camp. The first case concerned a Chinese POW who was killed by his fellow prisoners. The CFI could not find the body but they identified seven suspects and had many witnesses. The prosecution was eventually withdrawn due to the absence of witnesses, who had been transferred. The second case involved four dead bodies discovered at the South Korean POWs camp. South Korea and India again debated on the issue until the mediation of the UNC (Park, 2014, pp. 134–136). Afterward, the CFI sent 135 Chinese POWs to the communist side on December 31, 1953. Two American and eight South Korean POWs decided to return to UNC. The major transfer was then carried out in January 1954, with 21,839 POWs going to the UNC (Kim, 2019, pp. 224–236).<sup>31</sup> From these, the

Chinese were transferred to Taiwan by plane and boat (Chang, 2020b) and 347 POW Koreans, 21 Americans and one British were, strangely, sent to the communist side as they requested (Park, 2014, pp. 134–136).

The migration project of alternative POWs to neutral nations was also conducted since not all the POWs wished to return to their home countries. Chang presumed that they were not different from the rest but had tried to escape from their compound leaders and wished to be under the protection of neutral nations (Chang, 2020a, pp. 215–233). Eighty-eight anti-communist POWs (74 North Koreans, 12 Chinese and two South Koreans) went to India. The citizens of South Korea also protested when the CFI sent the remained POWs to a third neutral nation (Tayal, 2014, pp. 43–46; Joon, 2020, pp. 235–257).<sup>32</sup> When they arrived in India, two Chinese and six North Korean POWs were repatriated to their countries as requested. Fifty-five POWs (49 Koreans and six Chinese), including Kwan-taek Im, agreed to go to Brazil (Lee, 2018, pp. 277–310, Sik, 2020, pp. 258–281).<sup>33</sup> Fourteen others (12 Koreans and two Chinese) went to Argentina (Jojin, 2020).<sup>34</sup> The rest—nine Koreans and two Chinese, including Hyeong Kim, Ki-Cheol Ji and Dong-Hwa Hyun—decided to remain in India (Kim, 2004, pp. 83–115; Lee, 2020, pp. 282–306; Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, 2014, pp. 97–101).<sup>35</sup> From 1954 onwards, India refused to get involved in the international activity of the United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA), a new post-Korean War UN commission, but India's humanitarian commitment through the CFI, NNRC and NNSC, eventually won the approbation of Korean President Rhee, who said, “we want to forget unpleasant things about the Indian guards who had done so much under difficult circumstances and want to say good-bye to them with thanks” (Tayal, 2014, p. 47).

## Conclusion

The Korean War was brutal not only for the Korean governments and their citizens but also for the foreign soldiers and the leaders of the UN. The close relationship of South Korea with the United States preserved democracy in East Asia. The strategic support of the PRC and the Soviet Union (USSR) was the key motivation for the communist leaders of North Korea in the 1950s. This paper depicts that the newly minted role of the UN was an important aspect of the ideological-military solution for the war. The involvement of neutral nations brought a rational outcome for everyone engaged in the ‘Forgotten War.’ India's role, in particular, should not be disregarded in the peacekeeping mission. The two major powers, as well as South Korea, were not always happy with the South Asian nation that promoted the neutral policy of international statesmanship, but India's philosophy of decolonisation and anti-imperialism encouraged them to become a soft power at the UN. The non-violence policy of diplomacy was one of the political attractions by which they were able to play the role of a key decision-maker at the negotiation table of Korean issues between 1945 and 1955.

The geopolitical interest of India in the autonomous independence of the Korean peninsula was demonstrated when they participated in the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) as an official peacekeeper. India's efforts as the head of the UN organisation ensured the secure supervision of the national elections in post-colonial Korea (1947–50). India also lobbied for divided Korea to be merged as one nation, not two ideologically different polities. The political voice of India was not quite positive for Korea at the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), but India of the UNCOK supported UN Resolution 82 (1950) mandating that North Korea should go back to the 38th Parallel line.<sup>36</sup>

The non-military dispatch of the 60th Parachute Field Ambulance (PFA) represented the neutrality of India. Sixteen UN member states militarily assisted South Korea, but India stood with Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Italy and Germany, as medical supporters. The PFA's achievement encouraged not only UN casualties but also South Korean civilians in Daegu. The picture of injured allies' soldiers being carried off from the battleground of Pyongyang is well remembered as a brave narrative of the *Bucket Brigade*. During Operation Tomahawk (Parachute operation), the ‘Forward Element’ group of Indian medics cooperated with the American military action, putting out wounded personnel. Another PFA team placed in Daegu improved the health care system of the First ROK Army Hospital by training local professionals and four female doctors, as well as providing advanced supplies of food and medicine. The ‘Administrative Element’ group voluntarily re-organised the medical procedures of the West City Public Hospital with a healthy meal menu, clean facilities and standard drugs. The medical outreach, for marginalised community members, was additionally illustrated through the cure case of isolated orphans, who have been struggling with trachoma.

The humanitarian figure of the mediator (India) was continuously identified in the voluntary commitment of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) and the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC), where India, through the security activity of the Custodian Force India (CFI), was the key player in supervising the controversial process of the POW Exchange Pact. There were politico-social reactions as well as murder and leaders' confinement, but the South Asian nation consistently conducted the repatriation of all prisoners on behalf of the UN. The completion of the migration project for POWs was another evidence of India's policy of defending minority human rights. Thus, this paper has attempted to prove the diplomatic nature of neutral India as the ‘third emerging power’ after the two superpowers, in the complicated Korean problem. India was not militarily strong but the new ‘leader of Asia,’ based on its population and land area, could not be ignored in the international community of the UN in the late 1940s and the 1950s. In that way, if one of the two Koreas or both, who used to cooperate only with two ideological powers, had understood the global influence of India, the end of the Korean War would have been different, perhaps a bit closer to the reality of a unified Korea.<sup>37</sup> In the case of accepting the neutral foreign policy, the present Korean peninsula could be neither democracy nor communism but a single non-ideological nation without nuclear threats.

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## Notes

- 1 Certain date (such as numbers of soldier, POWs, dead, or wound) about the Korean War can be different in comparison with other sources. This paper uses the Revised Romanisation of Korean language for names, places and books unless indicated otherwise.
- 2 Please refer to *Samguk Yusa* (3rd book and 4th volume). Another national text of *Samguk Sagi* (三國史記) 24th book contains information on Malananta (मलानन्त), an Indian Buddhist monk who firstly brought Buddhist teachings to ancient Korea (Baekje) in 384 CE.
- 3 The second Asian conference was held in January 1949 and was aimed at discussing Asia's future political development; about 20 Asian governments attended this conference.
- 4 The commission initially was composed of nine nations, including Australia, Canada, Syria, the Philippines, France, El Salvador, China, Ukraine and India.
- 5 *GAOR (General Assembly Official Records)*, Session 2 Plan, Mtgs., vol 1, 1947a, p. 134.
- 6 For example, India tried to secure the big powers' support against Pakistani aggression over the state of Jammu and Kashmir.
- 7 The non-alignment diplomacy of Nehru was pushed by the urgency of the Korean matter. V.K. Krishna Menon (1896–1974), G.S. Bajpai (1891–1954, the Secretary-

- general of Nehru's Ministry of External Affairs.), K.P.S. Menon, K.M. Panikkar (1895–1963), Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900–1990) and B.N. Rau (1887–1953) constituted a professional team of highly competent diplomats hailing from “the academic background, intellectual rigour and communication skills.” In many cases, Nehru's agencies involved different issues pertaining to foreign policy decision-making.
- 8 GAOR (*General Assembly Official Records*), Session 2, Committee 1, 1947b. Mtg. 87, pp. 248–252.
- 9 UN DOC. A/523 (1948) 9 February, p. 20.
- 10 The USSR argued to retain the Moscow Agreement of 1946 in which the foreign ministers from the US, UK, USSR and China decided to provide the establishment of a four-power trusteeship over Korea before the achievement of Korea's own independence.
- 11 Kumara Padmanabha Sivasankara Menon Sr. served as the first Foreign Secretary of independent India from 1948 to 1952. He had been the Ambassador to the Republic of China before 1948.
- 12 Initially, Menon was opposed to holding elections just south of the 38th parallel. As the Canadian and Australian representatives to UNTCOK put it, holding elections in the south alone (i.e. south of the 38th parallel) would create a government in the south alone. Inevitably, a government would be created in the north, with both governments claiming sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula. In that sense, the election overseen by UNTCOK, in a way, would create two Koreas, and set the stage for the conventional war that would break out two years later.
- 13 Further, there was an uprising on the island of Jeju in opposition to separate elections in 1948, because the elections would, in effect, create two Koreas, and make the division of Korea permanent. In this incident, at least 30,000 people died in the suppression campaigns that were directed by U.S. military commanders.
- 14 For example, South Korea's new Government deeply distrusted India's multi-layered diplomatic approach, particularly its open policy toward North Korea.
- 15 Ministry of External Affairs Files (1947): “Recognition of Korea,” File no. 127–CJK 1949, National Archives, New Delhi.
- 16 S. Radhakrishnan, Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union, criticised the Soviet Union's behaviour as defying the guidelines stated in Article 28 of the UN Charter in Moscow on July 1, 1950.
- 17 “The Chargé in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State,” *Secret* No. 474 Seoul, May 05, 1950. Ref: Embtel 628 May 5, 1950.
- 18 China—i.e., People's Republic of China (PRC)—also complained about India's supposed double standards wherein the South Asian nation initially opposed the US and UK in supporting the restoration of China as a full member of the UN, but then opposed China's engagement in the Korean War and interfered in China's domestic affairs, including the Tibet issue (Du, 2022, pp. 98–112).
- 19 USA, Great Britain, Canada, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Columbia, Ethiopia, South Africa, New Zealand, Turkey, Greece, Thailand, Philippines and Luxembourg.
- 20 MASH means ‘Mobile Army Surgical Hospital.’
- 21 India also witnessed the invasion of Tibet by China on 7 October 1950; however, it did not take any political or military action. Moreover, China had even informed K.M. Panikar, the Indian ambassador in Beijing at that time, on October 2 that China would intervene in the Korean War if UN troops crossed the 38th parallel. The US authorities did take the news seriously but kept the earlier decision crossing the 38th parallel.
- 22 The others were like ‘election of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in November 1952,’ ‘death of Ioseb Dzhughashvili (Joseph Stalin, March 1953)’ and ‘Mao (China)'s modern desire.’
- 23 For this scene of the POW negotiations, Monica Kim carefully explored the process of how, the United States and their UN allies proposed a new kind of interrogation room, such as the case where POWs could exercise their “free will” and choose a country they wish to go to after the ceasefire.
- 24 Telegram from Allen (New Delhi) to Secretary of State, 1953, 7. 23, NARA, RG 59, General Record of the Department of State, Decimal File, 1950–54, Box 3027.
- 25 Including 40 army officers, 60 supporting staff, a team of eight officers and 42 men from the Indian Medical Corps for Red Cross services. The Custodian Force India (CFI) was comprised of the various military groups of the 5th Battalion, the Rajputana Rifles, the 3rd Battalion of the Garhwal Rifles, the 3rd Battalion, the Dogra Regiment, one company of the 3rd Battalion of the Mahar Machine Gun Regiment, the 6th Battalion of the Jat Regiment, the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment (Maratha) (2 Para), the 26th General Hospital, the 7th Field Hygiene Section, one platoon of the 74 Field Company Engineers (Independent) and the Indian Red Cross Unit, along with a few supporting units. Diplomatic officers were also included from the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs.
- 26 Ambassador B.N. Chakravarty was the Alternate Chairman of the NNRC.
- 27 70,183 North Koreans and 5640 Chinese. Previously, the so-called, ‘Operation Litter Switch’ had been conducted for a humanitarian purpose, particularly with many injected POWs in April–May of 1952.
- 28 7862 South Koreans, 3597 Americans, 945 British, 229 Turks, 40 Filipinos, 30 Canadians, 22 Colombians, 21 Australians, 12 Frenchmen, eight South Africans, two Greeks, two Dutch and one each from Belgium, New Zealand and Japan.
- 29 The CFI camp was called ‘Hind Nagar’ (indicating the place where Indian troops were staying for their duty of the POWs supervision).
- 30 South Korea even did not like that India seen as a pro-communist became part of the NNEC.
- 31 Kim carefully details the complex narratives of interrogators with prisoners over the personal decision of the POWs for their future.
- 32 Chosun Media, 25/2/1954.
- 33 There were 18 Christian POWs.
- 34 Chan Wahn Kim also mentioned that nine POWs went to Mexico.
- 35 Two of South Koreans eventually went back to their country.
- 36 Yet, the peacekeeper of Korea hesitated to actively support the second UN resolution (83), since Nehru believed in the policy of non-violence.
- 37 As it is known that both Koreas never had any economic, educational and cultural exchange with India until the 1970s.

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This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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