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국제학석사학위논문

**The 1954 Geneva Conference and Peace Regime  
on the Korean Peninsula**

1954년 제네바 통일회의와 한반도 평화체제

2014년 8월

서울대학교 국제대학원

국제학과 국제협력전공

**Jeremy Heintze**

**Master's Thesis**

**The 1954 Geneva Conference and Peace Regime  
on the Korean Peninsula**

**August 2014**

**Seoul National University  
Graduate School of International Studies  
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# The 1954 Geneva Conference and Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula

## 1954 년 제네바 한반도 통일회의와 평화체제

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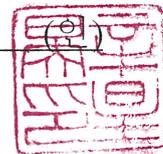
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## **Abstract**

# **The 1954 Geneva Conference and Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula**

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This thesis focuses on a historical analysis of the 1954 Geneva Conference's Korea chapter. By failing to reach an agreement at that conference, the parties enforced the 1953 Korean War Armistice Agreement, and thus the division of the Korean Peninsula. Although a crucial event in modern Korean history with far reaching regional and international implications, this conference has barely been studied as of today. By chronological reviewing the main events and relations among the parties, it is made apparent that the conference "failed" due to two main factors: (1) the structural constraints of the Cold War order and (2) the non-convergent self-interest of each party to the conference. This thesis further argues that the common perception that the conference failed is inaccurate, as most of the parties actually benefited from the conference.

**Keywords: 1954 Geneva Conference, Korean War, Armistice Agreement**

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# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Drawing the shapes: Division of Korea, Korean War &amp; Armistice Agreement</b> .....	<b>5</b>
2.1 Division of Korea.....	5
2.2 Korean War & Armistice Agreement.....	9
<b>3. Enforcing the division: The 1954 Geneva Conference</b> .....	<b>16</b>
3.1 Pre-Conference.....	17
3.1.1 Berlin Conference .....	17
3.1.2 United States - Rhee Negotiation.....	22
3.1.3 Communist block relations .....	29
3.2 Geneva Conference (April 26 – June 15).....	32
3.2.1 Allied Side position.....	33
3.2.2 Communist side position.....	37
3.2.3 Negotiations .....	39
3.3 Factors & Reassessment .....	48
3.3.1 Systemic Constraints: Cold War .....	48
3.3.2 Self-Interested Parties .....	49
3.3.3 Reassessment of the Conference’s outcome: a success in failure? .....	55
<b>4. Preserving the Division: Peace talks post Geneva Conference</b> .....	<b>58</b>
4.1 July 4 <sup>th</sup> Joint Communiqué .....	59
4.2 Inter-Korean Summits (2000, 2007) .....	60
4.3 Geneva Conference and peace regime on the Korea Peninsula .....	62
<b>5. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>64</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>66</b>

## **1. Introduction**

More than sixty years ago, the Korean War ended, thus making the temporary division of the Peninsula between the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel more permanent. Ever since, tensions have alternatively been increasing and decreasing, following the rhythm of regional and international politics. While during the Cold War the attention was rather focused on the European or South East Asian theatre, the Korean Peninsula continues to be one of the potential flash points nowadays. Accordingly, in order to better understand the motives lying behind today's situation, it is important to understand the origin and the process that lead to such a situation. Most scholars covering the early Cold War period tend to research the beginning of and the fighting that occurred during the Korean War, but not much attention has been directed at the Armistice Agreement and the resulting Geneva Conference. Stopping at the Armistice Agreement is only covering a part of the Korean War's story; in regard to modern Korean history, it is like allowing to build a house on weak foundations.

This thesis thus aims at consolidating these foundations by providing a historical analysis of the 1954 Geneva Conference's Korea chapter. By failing to reach an agreement at the political conference that followed the Armistice Agreement, the parties enforced the 1953 Korean War Armistice Agreement, and thus the division of the Korean Peninsula. While this conference was intended to settle the open questions on the Korean problem and strive to a peaceful settlement of the remaining issues on the Korea Peninsula, no

substantial outcome could be achieved in this regard. The consequences can still be felt today, as current tensions can be directly related existing loopholes in the Armistice Agreement and thus to the failure to settle a peace treaty at that time.<sup>1</sup>

Knowing that an agreement at this conference could have hindered the hardships and tensions encountered the last sixty years in the region, it seems critical to understand how the failure to reach an agreement at the 1954 Geneva Conference can be explained. Although a crucial event in modern Korean history with far reaching regional and international implications, this key event has barely been studied as of today. The main literature covers the Korean War until the Armistice Agreement, but then omits to analyze the implication of the Geneva Conference.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this Conference will for good settle the division of the Korean peninsula and set the tone of six decades of geopolitical relations involving the two Koreas. It is a major event that cannot be ignored.

In order to better understand this Conference, we mainly based our analysis on a thorough research of the available diplomatic cables. Although most of them were to be found at the United States' archives, and thus covering the allied side, several Communist diplomatic cables could be analyzed as well. This thesis follows a chronological order, starting shortly after the end of World War II until the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tae Gyun Park, "The Korean Armistice System and the Origins of the Cheonan and Yeonpyong Incidents", *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 24, no. 1 (2011): 115-136.

<sup>2</sup> There is for example almost no mention of the Geneva Conference, even in work of scholars such as Bruce Cumings. See Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: a History*, (New York: Modern Library, 2011)

Geneva Conference and reviewing the main events and relation among the parties involved. Here, it might be meaningful to notice that in this paper, unless specified otherwise, we will make a distinction between the South Korean government and the South Korean people. We understand that being under an authoritarian regime, the South Korea people didn't have much to say, although they were directly affected by the event happening at that time. The same goes for North Korea, even though not many resources are available to confirm this assumption.

By conducting this analysis, two main findings can be highlighted. First, it is made clear that the international setting –and thus constraints- in which a conference takes place plays a primordial role in shaping each party's strategy. These boundaries cannot be shifted by the parties, and therefore should not be ignored. Second, this paper highlights the self-interested motives of each participant in the conference. In other words, although the official aim of the Geneva Conference was to settle the Korean question, all the parties involved arrived at the conference with the aim to achieve other (hidden) goals. Accordingly, it was obviously impossible to eventually agree on the official agenda. The findings of the Geneva Conference can also be applied to further peace talks such as the 1972 Pyongyang summit or the 2000 and 2007 inter-Korean summits. It is made apparent that ulterior motives are one of the main factor behind the “failure” of these negotiations.

These findings contribute in several ways to academic research. First, this thesis provides a thorough analysis of the 1954 Geneva Conference, underlining the main interests and strategies at work. Also, this paper isolates the factors that shaped the outcome of the Conference, providing for its official failure. Yet, we also argue that this conference was not a failure, as most of the participants were able to reach their real aim. Given the constraints of international politics and the intrinsic motives of each party, the conference's qualification of failure seems rather inaccurate. These findings then provide further factual implications for the holding of future peace negotiations, arguing that a peace regime rather than a peace treaty should be sought, if one wants to achieve, eventually, a peaceful settlement of the Korean question.

This thesis is divided into three main parts. The first chapter will provide a brief background overview of the division of the Korean Peninsula. This chapter will also highlight existing tensions between the United States and the Republic of Korea, two allies in the North East Asian Region. The second chapter will provide a thorough analysis of the Geneva Conference, from its planning to its ending. Finally, the last chapter will very briefly highlight similarities between the Geneva Conference and following unification talks in order to draw some concluding remarks for future peace talks.

## **2. Drawing the shapes: Division of Korea, Korean War & Armistice Agreement**

A sound understanding of the 1954 Geneva Conference's outcomes can only be gained by analyzing the Conference in its overall context. Thus, it is important to consider the events and interactions that led and shaped the way to the conference. Furthermore, it is also vital to grasp the larger context of world politics in order to better understand the final results of the Conference.

This chapter will thus provide a brief historical overview of major events that eventually influenced the outcome of the Geneva Conference. Divided into two parts, this chapter will first cover the division of Korea following World War II, highlighting the already existing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union over the Korean Peninsula. The second part will cover the Korean War and the Armistice Agreement, which set the basis for a permanent division of the peninsula.

### **2.1 Division of Korea**

Following the 1943 Cairo Conference and the 1945 Yalta Conference, the allies' leaders bargained the Soviet participation in the Pacific theater. In exchange of the Soviet support, Roosevelt assured Stalin that, among others, several disputed territories, such as the southern part of the Sakhalin, would return to the Soviet Union once Japan is defeated. Furthermore, Stalin and Roosevelt also agreed on a four-power (United States,

Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and Republic of China) trusteeship over Korea. A few days after Germany's capitulation, Stalin kept his word and declared war against Japan. The combination of US atomic bombings and Soviet offensives in Manchuria eventually led Japan to capitulate on August 14, 1945. However, with the Soviets rapidly advancing towards Korea, the U.S. administration became afraid that the entire Korean Peninsula might fall under Soviet control. Thus, in order to counter such a possibility, the U.S. administration hastily drafted a plan for the administration of postwar Japan, defining the areas of responsibilities between the United States, Soviet Union and the Republic of China. Known as General Order No.1<sup>3</sup>, this document divides the Korean Peninsula into two parts, along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. This plan, which was accepted by the Soviet Union, was enforced when U.S. forces arrived in Incheon on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945, and started taking control of the southern half of the peninsula, shortly after the Soviets took control of major cities north of the parallel. The division of the Korean Peninsula seemed to create problems soon enough, as mentioned by U.S. Secretary of State Byrnes, who described the situation as unsatisfactory, especially because the movements of goods and persons as well as the functioning of the public sector on a national level were hindered. It is in order to solve these economic and administrative issues that a five years trusteeship in Korea was proposed and a joint Soviet-American Commission established at the 1945 Moscow Conference.<sup>4</sup> One of the main aims of this commission was to form

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<sup>3</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff, *General Order No. 1, Aug 17, 1945*, Congressional Record, September 6, 1945.

<sup>4</sup> The Moscow Conference gathered the Foreign Ministers of the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union in December 1945 to discuss the problems of occupation, establishing peace, and other Far East issues.

and assist a provisional Korean democratic government, whose goal would be to re-establish Korea as an independent state.

Yet, despite the allies' victory against the axis powers, tensions between the Communist and the Western blocks were already starting to build up. These seemingly harmonious policies on the Korean question were actually the results of self-interested objectives. On the one hand, as analyzed by Park,<sup>5</sup> the U.S. administration favored an indirect ruling system for Korea. A trusteeship would allow the US, to maintain a grip over Korea, while minimizing its implication, Korea not being considered as a priority country at that time. Furthermore, looking at the states involved in the trusteeship, the capitalist side would be benefiting a numerical advantage of 3:1 over the Communist side. Accordingly, such a setting would allow an indirect government to overcome the propensity of socialist leaned Korean independence activists and eventually form a pro-Western government in Korea. On the other hand, Lee<sup>6</sup> outlines that Stalin favored a trusteeship mechanism as a mean to expand Soviet presence and influence. While neither the U.S. nor the USSR were actively pursuing a division of Korea, their vision of the world order and the role they would play in it was limiting them in finding acceptable compromises for a functioning trusteeship.

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<sup>5</sup> Tae Gyun Park, *An Ally and Empire: Two Myths of South-Korea-United States Relations 1945-1980*, (Seongnam: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2012): 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Jongsoo Lee, *The Partition of Korea after World War II: A Global History*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006): 84-85.

Amid the U.S. administration implementing its containment policy, tensions with the Soviet Union kept gradually escalating. A direct consequence was that it became even more important for the U.S. to establish a strong pro-West government in southern Korea. However, the political landscape in Korea was not very favorable to the United States, as conservatives (or pro-American) were a minority in Korea. The U.S. military government in Korea thus tried to bring in new conservative figures from overseas so as to strengthen the right of the political spectrum. Consequently, one of the first steps was to involve the Korean Provisional Government, and especially Syngman Rhee, a strong opponent of communism.<sup>7</sup> The choice of Syngman Rhee had been all but obvious: indeed, in earlier assessments by the State Department, Rhee was negatively evaluated and thought to be behind a dispute among the Korean independence activists in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the alternatives to Rhee were limited and despite trying to put other candidates forward, the United States ended up with no other choice than to reluctantly support Syngman Rhee as leader for southern Korea.<sup>9</sup>

Trusteeship had been much debated on the American side. The State department in Washington was strongly pushing for it whereas the US military government in Korea believed that such an option was unlikely to work out. The events gave reason to the latter one. Indeed, in a context of increasing tensions between the Soviet Union and the

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<sup>7</sup> Tae Gyun Park, *An Ally and Empire: Two Myths of South-Korea-United States Relations 1945-1980*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

United States, neither of the powers was really willing to compromise. Moreover, it also soon appeared that a trusteeship system would be hard to implement, as the conservative Koreans were strongly opposed to it. Thus, such a system would have had to be run with left and moderates Koreans, which would have been against U.S. interests. Washington started realizing this problem and shifted its position accordingly. Such a shift was also fostered by discussion with the U.S military government as well as with Syngman Rhee. Both argued against a trusteeship and in favor of a strong pro-American government in southern Korea.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, after two meetings, the U.S.-Soviet Union Joint Commission failed in fall of 1947 and subsequently, the U.S. State Department transferred the Korean question to the United Nations General Assembly.

Despite Soviet opposition, the UN carried out elections in the southern part in May 1948 and on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948, the Republic of Korea was formally established, with Syngman Rhee as head of state. The Soviet Union refused simultaneous UN supervised elections in the North and hold separates ones in the fall of 1948, thus establishing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

## **2.2 Korean War & Armistice Agreement**

The Korean War started on June 25<sup>th</sup> 1950. Several events relating to the outbreak of the war are noteworthy mentioning. First, despite Kim Il Sung's insistence to reunite Korea by force, Stalin was at first opposed and eventually reluctantly agreed. Matray argues

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

that the Soviet leader gave his authorization<sup>11</sup>, out of fear that if North Korea would not take the initiative to attack first, the Republic of Korea would do it at a later stage. Furthermore, Stalin thought that it was in his duty to support Kim Il Sung: opposing such an attack would have had undermined his credibility as leader of the Communist world.<sup>12</sup> This shows us that even though Stalin apprehended a U.S. intervention in case of war, he was willing to take the risk in order to preserve “unity” on the Communist side. Second, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea in June 1949 and Acheson’s Press Speech on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1950 are emblematic of U.S.-South Korea relations at that time. On the one side, the United States considered Korea only as one element of their global foreign policy. Following Kennan’s containment policy, Korea became a “second tier” country in terms of geostrategic importance, a country that could be “lost” as long as Japan would remain safe. Even though it was not question to abandon Korea, as can be seen by the substantial aid that was allocated to the ROK,<sup>13</sup> the U.S Korea policy could have been perceived as cautious, or even passive. On the other side however, South Korea and its President Syngman Rhee were strongly dependent on U.S. economic and military support. Thus, any U.S. action, especially regarding military matters, which would weaken the Republic of Korea was seen as very negative and vehemently disputed. Understandably, Rhee was rather focusing on his country’s interests and was not satisfied with the U.S. policy towards his country, which *de facto* made it impossible for

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<sup>11</sup> James Martay, “Dean Acheson’s Press Speech Reexamined”, *Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1970), 368.

<sup>13</sup> Tae Gyun Park, *An Ally and Empire: Two Myths of South-Korea-United States Relations 1945-1980*, 89-90.

him to march northward as he continuously threatened to do and thus, in this opinion, posed a security threat to the Republic of Korea. Consequently, the relations between the U.S. and Syngman Rhee were already tense before the start of the war. Despite both sides being anti-communist, the U.S. was playing its role as a global power with all the repercussions that this implies, whereas Syngman Rhee was trying to get as much as he could from the U.S. in order to sustain and secure his country. Thirdly, a major shift in U.S. foreign policy occurred in 1949. Indeed, in that year, China became communist, after several years of civil war. Thus, Japan remained the United States' only Asian allied country with sufficient military and industrial potential. In other words, the Korean Peninsula's importance increased in U.S. eyes, as a fully communist Korea would be a much bigger threat to Japan, and thus per extension to the US. Furthermore, in the meantime, the Soviet Union successfully tested its first nuclear weapon, hence ending U.S.'s monopoly on this kind of armament.<sup>14</sup> These two important events lead the U.S. administration to adopt a more hawkish foreign policy. This shift was materialized by actions such as the establishment of a mutual defense assistance agreement with the Republic of Korea in January 1950 and especially with the draft and subsequent approval of the National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68) on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1950. This report reshaped and extended Kennan's containment policy. It not only focused on diplomatic factors anymore but also added a strong emphasis on military means as way to achieve successful containment. This transformation in U.S. foreign policy had a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 95-98.

direct consequence on U.S.-South Korea relation: the United States, under UN flag, intervened almost immediately after the North started its attack on the South.

The Korean War can be roughly divided into three phases. In the first phase (June 25<sup>th</sup> - September 1950), the North Korean troops pushed their way down from the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel to Busan, where the UN forces were able to establish the Busan Perimeter. In the second phase (September 1950 - April 1951), the UN forces started pushing up from the Busan Perimeter, after General MacArthur, Commander United Nations Command (UNC), successfully led an amphibious landing in Incheon between September 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>. The North Korean forces retreated above the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and the UN forces kept pushing, forcing the communist troops close to the Yalu River, at the Chinese border. However, this move led China to enter the war; with Chinese support, North Korean troops progressively pushed back towards the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and eventually took over Seoul again. The third phase of the war (April 1951 - June 1953) was a World War I like situation, with the two sides fighting along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel without being able to get far beyond it. The first talks for a peaceful settlement of the Korean War were held early in the conflict. On July 10<sup>th</sup> 1951, the two sides met in Kaesong in order to start armistice talks. However, the talks went on and off for the following two years. Even though the two blocks wanted to achieve such a goal, the voices within each coalition were far from being united. Indeed, South Korea and North Korea were both opposed to an armistice agreement, as it would inevitably divide the peninsula into two. They instead favored a complete unification, Syngman Rhee wanting to “march north” and Kim Il-Sung wanting to “drive

the enemy into the Sea”. Interestingly, North Korea rapidly changed its motto to “drive the enemy to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel”.<sup>15</sup> Even though Kim Il-Sung would have wanted a complete unification, such a goal was not achievable without Soviet or Chinese support. Yet, as none of them was willing to provide such a support, and Kim Il-Sung being dependent on them, he had no other choice but to comply with their strategy. Realizing that the UNC forces were superior in terms of military capabilities, Mao adopted a guerilla warfare tactic, trying to consume the UNC forces slowly over extend period of time, instead of a launching a massive offensive.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, Kim Il-Sung reluctantly agreed to participate in an armistice agreement, under the condition that UNC forces would be held below the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and that foreign troops would gradually withdraw from the Peninsula. With North Korea officially changing its stance rapidly, the Communist block could preserve an image of unity. The story on the UNC side was however quite different. For Syngman Rhee, similarly to Kim Il-Sung, anything else than complete unification -under southern regime- was not conceivable. He accordingly strongly opposed to any armistice talks but on the contrary to Kim Il-Sung, Rhee made his discontent very obvious, through several declarations and actions. Among others, he organized anti-armistice demonstrations and even threatened to withdraw his troops from the UN Command and continue the fight by its own. Such a situation would have had strongly undermined the legitimacy of the UN’s presence on the Korean Peninsula and thus had to be absolutely avoided. Rhee knew that the United States could not afford

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<sup>15</sup> William Stueck, *The Korean War: An international History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 216.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

to lose its support, and used brinkmanship strategies throughout the war. The relations between the U.S and Rhee were conflictual to the point that the American government seriously considered removing Rhee from power in two different coup plans. Lacking alternative candidates, these plans were however never executed and Rhee stayed in power. Probably knowing that the U.S. could not replace him, he must have felt more confident over time in challenging America's leadership. Rhee's original condition for accepting an armistice talk was that the U.S. could guarantee South Korea's safety afterwards. The U.S. government first refused to consider this request, as they believed it could have a negative impact on any armistice negotiation talks. Rhee however stayed strong on his position and was eventually able to bargain the promise of a mutual defense treaty and economic aid. Even with the pledge of a security treaty, Rhee still showed his discontent over the armistice process; on June 18<sup>th</sup>, he unilaterally released 25,000 North Korean anti-communist prisoners of war, creating further tensions in the truce talks, as negotiations about the POW's issue were heated ones. Nevertheless, even though Rhee did not sign the Armistice Agreement, he did eventually not oppose it. Consequently, after two years of negotiations, an Armistice Agreement<sup>17</sup> was signed on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1953 between the UN Command and the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's volunteers. The fights on the Korean Peninsula were halted, but the conflict continued.

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<sup>17</sup> Text of the Korean War Armistice Agreement, July 27, 1953. Available on <http://news.findlaw.com>

On a global level, there was a strong motivation to put an end to the war on the Korean Peninsula. Both sides tended to agree that the war was costly in terms of human lives and economic assets. The US domestic opinion also expressed itself against the war, thus pressuring the U.S. government to find an exit from the conflict. On the Communist side, the resources to compel the U.S. power was lacking. Shifting to a protracted war enabled them to keep the fighting on, but doing so, they also feared that in the middle run, the U.S. would allocate more resources to the Korean operation theatre in order to solve the issue once for all. Interestingly, within the coalitions, the consensus over the Armistice was rather absent. The two main actors directly concerned by the effect of the agreement were opposed to it. They eventually agreed to tag along, not because they changed their opinion but rather because they didn't have any realistic alternatives. With such a setting, prospects for a peaceful settlement of the Korean question were already dubious.

### **3. Enforcing the division: The 1954 Geneva Conference**

The Geneva Conference was held between April 26 and June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1954. It was the political conference that followed the signing of the Armistice Agreement. The aim of the conference was to peacefully settle the Korean question. In other words, to find a solution to reunify both Koreas and restore peace on the peninsula. However, the conference is considered to be a failure, as no peace agreement was signed and the Korean Peninsula accordingly stayed divided. Nevertheless, what strikes most is that since the signing of the armistice –and thus well prior to the conference- none of the main parties involved even thought a positive outcome could result from it; yet they still attended the conference. In this chapter, we will analyze the motives that pushed those parties to go to Geneva despite their lack of confidence in a positive resolution of the conference's aim. This will then enable us to derive the factors that led the conference to “fail”. Furthermore, we will reassess the outcome of the conference and argue that the conference as such, according to its official goal, was indeed a failure, but that several parties actually benefited from the resulting status quo. We divided this chapter into three parts: the first part will cover the pre-conference negotiations. The second part will cover the conference in itself. The last part will finally outline the factors that led the conference to end this way. Derived from this analysis, a new assessment of the conference's outcome will be provided.

### **3.1 Pre-Conference**

#### 3.1.1 Berlin Conference

The preamble of the Armistice Agreement stipulates that it is temporary and purely military in character. The settlement is thus meant to be valid until a permanent peaceful resolution can be agreed upon. To achieve such a resolution, Article IV stipulates that a political conference should be organized within three months of signing in order to reach a political compromise between the two parties. While a consensus could eventually be found to end combats on the Korean Peninsula, reaching a compromise to hold a political conference proved to be a much more daunting task. According to the text of the Armistice Agreement, a political conference should have been hold until the end of October 1953. However, both sides couldn't agree on the terms and it is only in early 1954, during the Berlin Conference<sup>18</sup> that the foreign ministers of the "big four" - United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain and France - agreed to set a date for a conference on Korea. There are two interesting insights that can be derived from the negotiation and outcomes of the Berlin Conference.

First, the question of participating members to the conference, which had previously been strongly debated, found a consensus at the Berlin conference: each of the "big four" was allowed to invite third party countries to the political conference. The United States invited the nations that fought on the UN side during the War, while the Soviet Union

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<sup>18</sup> The Berlin Conference of 1954 was a meeting of the "Big Four" foreign ministers, where issues of European security such as the issue of Germany and Austria were discussed.

invited North Korea and China. Such a setting accordingly solved the thorny issue of Chinese participation, to which the United States were at first strongly opposed. Indeed, allowing China to participate in a “five-powers” conference as requested by the Soviet Union would have given Beijing a new recognition on the international stage, raising them as an equal to the United States. By inviting several other powers, it was possible for the United States to have Beijing attend the conference while at the same time denying them the status of equal by simply not recognizing Beijing as one of the great powers.<sup>19</sup> In regard to the question of Chinese participation, it can also be added that on the Communist side, China and the Soviet Union not only have been regularly in contact<sup>20</sup>, but also helped each other in regard to conference preparation and strategy planning.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it is also necessary to mention that the United States strongly insisted on a two-sided conference, where Communists and free world would face each other. The mere setting of the conference already provides us with a clear hint on the willingness of each side to compromise.<sup>22</sup>

Second, it is interesting to notice that South Korea wasn't involved or even notified about the discussions happening at the Berlin Conference. This is a clear indication on the

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<sup>19</sup> Jong Yil Ra, “The Politics of Conference: The Political Conference on Korea in Geneva, 26 April-15 June 1954”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 3 (1999): 409-410.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.

<sup>21</sup> Chen Jian, Zhihua Shen, “The Geneva Conference of 1954: New Evidences from the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China”, in *Inside China's Cold War*, Cold War International History Project Bulletin 16 (2007/2008), 8.

<sup>22</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, March 23, 1954, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS), 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 51

status of South Korea - United States relation. Syngman Rhee's actions during the previous years did not infuse trust in any ways among US officials. On the contrary, Rhee was perceived as being very unpredictable,<sup>23</sup> and thus keeping him out of the loop was a good way to avoid him sabotaging the efforts. Such a move was especially relevant as around the time of the Berlin Conference, Rhee was about to deliver a letter to Eisenhower where he was complaining about the United States' lack of implication in supporting South Korea's effort to unify the entire peninsula as well as the US weakness in front of communism and pro-Japanese policies<sup>24</sup>. In this context, it is to assume that if Rhee would have known about the negotiations, he would probably have tried to jeopardize them. With pieces of information leaking to the press, Rhee could have learnt the results through it. The US administration however took the risk not to inform him, rather than providing him with a detailed account<sup>25</sup>. When Rhee was presented with the *fait accompli*, his reaction was, as expected, sour. In the days following the announcement of the Geneva Conference, Rhee's government made its position clear, as can be understood in the following cables from Briggs, U.S. Ambassador in Korea:

*“It is readily apparent from ROK Government emanations [...] that their immediate reaction to Berlin agreement is one of disappointment, disgruntlement and anger. [...] One of the principal criticism by ROK is*

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<sup>23</sup> Henry W. Brands, “The Dwight Eisenhower Administration, Syngman Rhee, and the “Other” Geneva Conference”, *Pacific History Review* 24, no. 1 (1987): 63.

<sup>24</sup> “Dulles to Dept. State”, February 16, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

*round-table nature of conference which they allege will permit majority decisions and exclude veto by one of participating sides [...] While Berlin agreement is obviously disappointment and source of resentment to ROK Government one cannot entirely escape conclusion response at least partly motivated by exasperation that conference in fact going to be held. ROK had apparently concluded political conference unlikely and was planning accordingly. On balance Embassy inclined believe they will not boycott conference but possibility some such thoughtless action should not be entirely discounted”<sup>26</sup>*

Moreover, Rhee was not only disappointed but also strongly opposed such a conference, that he assessed as unlikely to succeed and illegitimate:

*“[...] Tenor of Rhee’s comments re prospects for success Geneva conference wholly pessimistic [...] He concluded Geneva merely another trap such as Panmunjom [...] He concluded that if allies continue to ignore Communist strategy of delay ROK will have to resort to action of its own. [...] It is apparent Rhee is deeply disappointed and dissatisfied with Berlin agreement which he regards as unbaptized off-spring resulting from original sin, that is, 1953 armistice agreement”<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, February 20, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 20.

<sup>27</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, March 1, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 24-25.

These excerpts show that Rhee's administration was not planning and not willing to attend such a conference. The situation was similar to the one previous to the signing of the truce: the United States were pursuing a goal and South Korea an opposite one. As we will discuss later one, the entire challenge for the United States was to bring Rhee to the table again.

The Berlin Conference was the occasion needed to push for a political conference on the Korean question. Even though the meeting in Berlin was initially planned to discuss issues related to reducing international tensions, such as the status of Germany and Austria, the big four's leaders were also able to hold talks on the Far East. Besides setting a timeframe for the conference, the Berlin conference highlighted and further shaped the relations among the different parties: it ended without much being achieved on the main questions at hand, emphasizing the gap and lack of willingness of each block to compromise. Anyhow, with the Conference scheduled, it was time for each side to prepare for it. While on the communist side China and the Soviet Union were actively collaborating, the United States had the difficult task to unite their allies under a common banner. With an angered Rhee, intensive negotiations were lying ahead of Eisenhower's administration.

### 3.1.2 United States - Rhee Negotiation

Holding a political conference on Korea would not make much sense if South Korea was not to attend it. Indeed, such an absence would not only undermine the legitimacy of the United Nations and the United States as a party to the Korean War, but also strongly undermine the United States' influence as representative of the "free world". Consequently, having Rhee's administration sitting at the table of negotiation was a must for the U.S. government. Even though Rhee was strongly opposed to the conference, he knew his strategic positioning towards the U.S. and was confident he could replicate his pre-armistice agreement behavior. Therefore, he was ready to bargain his participation and obtain as many favorable terms as he could.

Shortly after being informed of the big four's decision to hold the Geneva Conference, South Korea's Foreign Affairs' minister Pyun requested in a cable, dated from March 6, 1954, further information to the U.S. Department of States, in order to help Rhee form his decision on a participation.<sup>28</sup> In other word, Pyun listed 11 conditions that would strongly favor a South Korean participation at the conference. Among the major concerns, Pyun mentioned the prestige, and thus bigger influence the Soviet Union and China could get from being sponsor and quasi-sponsor of the conference. He also pointed out the importance to hold separate conference for Korea and Vietnam, as having them at the same time would allow participant to reach a package deal. All these concerns

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<sup>28</sup> "Briggs to Dept. State", March 6, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 29-31.

relate to the fact that a strong communist block would inevitably tilt the balance in disfavor of South Korea and eventually improve the communists' position. The most important point however, was Pyun's request that the U.S. commit to unify Korea by force, in case the conference failed. Even though paragraph 11 of Pyun's letter is still classified at the request of the Korea government, its content can be derived from the replies by the U.S. government:<sup>29</sup>

*“Foreign Minister Pyun’s letter is clearly designed to obtain certain additional commitments from US Government in return for ROK agreement participate in Korean political conference [...] Numbered questions in remainder of letter appear to be attempt to establish that conference at Geneva is not political conference provided for in armistice, and therefore ROK has basis for obtaining new and more far-reaching commitments than those given ROK by US last year [...] Paragraph 11 which in effects demands we commit ourselves to resume fighting of conference fails to unify Korea is obviously key commitment desired [...] Rhee is obviously trying to blackmail us into commitments we have hitherto declined to give him”*

Of course, these terms were not acceptable for the United States, as can be read from Briggs' cable. The Armistice Agreement was signed, exactly because the United States were not willing to keep bearing the high human and economic costs of the war.

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<sup>29</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, March 6, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 31-32.

Resuming the fights would thus not only go against this premise but would also come at a time were the situation in Indochina was not favorable to the Western block. Furthermore, knowing that Rhee did not want anything other than unification under ROK conditions, giving him the certainty that the U.S. would intervene in case of failure at the conference meant that he would certainly not be willing to compromise during the negotiations. Nevertheless, even without giving such a commitment, the important gap between the two sides' positions already triggered negative U.S. evaluation on the perspective of reaching an agreement at the conference. Briggs stated on March 6, that "obviously President Rhee and ROK Government may be most difficult hurdle in reaching agreement on free world side of conference on some such proposal, and [he is] not optimistic Rhee's agreement can be obtained".<sup>30</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Dulles, on his side, added on March 10<sup>th</sup> that "if ROK and US agree on unification of Korea, it will happen; otherwise not".<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, having agreed to participate in the conference, the Eisenhower's administration had no other choice than try to persuade Rhee to send delegates to Geneva. At that time, the U.S. Embassy's assessment was that Rhee was confident the conference couldn't be possible without his support. In this regard, the U.S. decided to convince Rhee that the conference would not be postponed, no matter what he would undertake.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in reply to Pyun's March 3<sup>rd</sup> letter, Dulles tried to reassure the Korean administration on their questions but also underlined several times the importance of Korean participation and warned them against any drop out:

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<sup>30</sup> "Briggs to Dept. State", March 6, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> "Briggs to Dept. State", March 16, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 36.

*“Irrespective of the opinions which may entertain as to likelihood of the success of the Korean Political Conference, I do not believe that it would be understood or easily forgiven if the Government of Korea should refuse to take part in a conference to be held at a place and under circumstances corresponding to its own choice, designed to bring about ‘the establishment, by peaceful means, of a united and independent Korea’.”*<sup>33</sup>

Eisenhower himself confirmed this position, in a letter sent on March 20<sup>th</sup>. In his reply to Rhee, the U.S. President restated his government’s decision and especially stressed the fact that after having pushed so much for reunification on the Korean peninsula, Rhee’s absence from a conference, which aim it was to find a way to unify Korea, could hardly be justified.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Eisenhower also mentioned Rhee’s request to support the training and equipping of an additional fifteen to twenty new ROK units. He didn’t answer directly to the request, as the topic was still under discussion among his staff, but he warned that such an increase “would dangerously overtax the human and material resources of [the ROK]”.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, he did not turn down completely Rhee’s request, adding that “it may be feasible to develop a joint Republic of Korea - United States program to build a carefully trained and mobilizable reserve in the Republic of Korea”.<sup>36</sup> With the start of the conference approaching, it became pressing for the

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<sup>33</sup> “Dulles to Embassy in Korea”, March 17, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 42-43.

<sup>34</sup> “Dulles to Embassy in Korea”, March 20, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 45-46.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Eisenhower administration to get a reply on Korean participation. Accordingly, a shift in U.S. thinking can be seen around that moment. In his cable to the Department of States on April 6<sup>th</sup>, Briggs mentions that in his opinion, the United States “should seek give Rhee and Pyun early reply re extent to which US prepared support ROK buildup”.<sup>37</sup> Failing to do so would, according to him, give a good pretext to the Korean government not to attend the conference. Indeed, Briggs feared that Rhee could see the refusal to provide military support as a suspension of the accords made previous to the Armistice Agreement. In other words, if the U.S. were not able to keep their word on already agreed upon pact, there would be no reason they would do so on newly negotiated agreements. Notwithstanding the U.S administration’s lack of answer, Rhee kept pushing for U.S. guarantee. On April 8<sup>th</sup>, he wrote again to Eisenhower, but instead of being reckless, rather softened his ton.<sup>38</sup>

*“Not knowing what to do at this darkest moment in our fight for survival of Korea, I am appealing to you once again by asking you to advise me what can be done. [...] Have we not cooperated [...]? What is the result? Our enemies are today in infinitely stronger position than they ever were and UN Forces are talking about going home. [...] UN statesmen do not seem to know what they are doing. They are playing with fire. By trying to resist*

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<sup>37</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, April 6, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Henry W. Brands, “The Dwight Eisenhower Administration, Syngman Rhee, and the “Other” Geneva Conference”, p. 69.

*Armed Forces with talks, they can never save Indochina and Korea or even their own nations”.*<sup>39</sup>

While the U.S. administration still feared that Rhee would eventually not show up in Geneva, they also assessed that the ROK government was probably delaying its participation’s confirmation in order to maximize U.S concessions.<sup>40</sup> This tactic was similar to the one used in previous negotiations between the U.S. and South Korea, and proved to be pretty effective, as Rhee was able to obtain several guarantees already. Learning from these interactions, the U.S. government could thus hint at a Korean participation, but still had to ensure it. Eisenhower consequently decided on April 16 to dispatch General Van Fleet to Seoul in order to consult with Rhee over the proposed reinforcement of the ROK’s military, which included the further development of the ROK army, modernization of the ROK’s navy and air force as well as a reorganization of the Marine Corps.<sup>41</sup> Two days later, and only eight days before the start of the conference, Rhee finally confirmed that a South Korean delegation led by Foreign Minister Pyun would be present in Geneva. Agreeing to attend the talks nevertheless didn’t mean that Rhee changed his opinion on the conference in itself. To explain Korea’s presence at the Geneva Conference to its domestic audience, Rhee published a statement on April 19<sup>th</sup>, where he declared that it was a “final time-consuming attempt

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<sup>39</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, April 8, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 79-80.

<sup>40</sup> “Memorandum by the Coordinator for the Geneva Conference (Johnson) to the Acting Secretary of State (Smith)”, April 12, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 93.

<sup>41</sup> “Smith to Embassy in Korea”, April 16, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 104-105.

to attain unification by peaceful means” and that he hoped that United States would support him to obtain unification “by other means” if and when the conference failed. He further added that South Korea should “do [its] best to cooperate with the United States in seeking peaceful unification. But it is only fair to declare that [South Korea] can accept no compromise”.<sup>42</sup>

Eventually, the United States were able to bring a South Korea delegation to Geneva. However, Rhee didn’t change his perception of the conference, which he still considered as illegitimate and highly unfavorable to South Korea. Thus, as we will discuss in chapter 3.2, flexibility during the negotiation on the “free world’s” side was extremely reduced, and the chance to reach an agreement proportionally low, as can be seen from this assessment by Briggs:

*“ROK likely object vociferously at each modification but might reluctantly accept them as only possibility early unification, if convinced US has no intention backing unification by force. From past experience in negotiations with ROK appears we must resign ourselves to bitter bargaining, probably punctuated by irresponsible public outbursts whenever these seem to ROK advantage”.*<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, April 18, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 114.

<sup>43</sup> “Briggs to Dept. State”, April 19, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 116-117.

### 3.1.3 Communist block relations

While the allied side was facing considerable problems to find a common ground, relations were better on the communist side. Even if China's participation was hotly disputed by the United States and South Korea, the Soviet Union kept pushing for it. They were indeed the ones who brought up this issue during the Berlin Conference and didn't let it go. The presence of the PRC at the Soviet's side was beneficial for the two countries: on the one side, having China at its side would certainly allow the Soviet Union to increase their leverage over the United States. On the other side, it was the first time the People's Republic of China participated in an international conference, thus providing them with a unique opportunity to profile themselves on the international stage. In regard to this mutually benefiting dynamic, it is not surprising that both countries actually worked quite closely together.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, not many valuable documents have been declassified on the Communist side. Nevertheless, from what is available, it is apparent that China was very enthusiastic to participate in the conference and accordingly prepared for it very carefully. The "Preliminary Opinions on the Assessment of and Preparation for the Geneva Conference"<sup>45</sup> approved on March 2<sup>nd</sup> outlines the broad strategy the PRC intended to adopt. Interestingly, the assessment of the "imperialist aggressor's" block proved to be quite accurate:

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<sup>44</sup> Chen Jian, *Zhihua Shen*, 8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

*“The block of imperialist aggressors, and the US government in particular, has been intentionally underestimating the significance of the Geneva Conference, predicting that it, as happened in Berlin on Germany and Austria, will not achieve any result. But the opinion of the United States, Britain and France on the Korea issue and especially in the Indochina issue and many other issues of international affairs are far from identical. Sometimes, the contradictions among them are very large, and they are facing many international difficulties too”.*<sup>46</sup>

The strategy to follow was based on this assessment. As it was China’s first participation in an international conference, one of Beijing’s main aims was to improve its image towards other states. Therefore, the Central Secretariat approved an approach of active participation in order to enhance China’s international relations and “undermine the policy of blockade, embargo, and expanding armaments and war preparations by the US imperialists”.<sup>47</sup> In other words, being proactive and willing to reach an agreement would shed a positive light on China, and per extension, undermine the United States’ credibility. Indeed, assuming that the United States and their allies would try to prevent a positive outcome of happening, the PRC’s regime would be able to put the blame of a potential failure on the United States’ back and accordingly be perceived internationally as relatively more “peaceful” or peace willing. Therefore, on the Korea question, the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

PRC was preaching a “slogan of peaceful unification, national independence, and free elections and oppose Syngman Rhee’s [policy of] armed unification, the US-South Korea treaty of defense, and so-called free elections held when the people have no freedom at all”.<sup>48</sup>

By attending the Geneva Conference, China was also aiming at establishing contacts with Western powers, such as Britain and France. In this regard, the March 2<sup>nd</sup> note mentions that even though the venue was meant to discuss the Korean and Indochina questions, China had to be ready, if the occasion arose, to discuss “other urgent international issues that are favorable to relaxing the tense international situation”.<sup>49</sup> Such topics were thus seen as a good way to approach other countries and advance China’s position. Consequently, it was suggested to prepare the discussion files, especially in regard to China’s relations with Britain, France and Canada.

A glimpse into the working relation between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China can be seen in a report sent to Zhou Enlai, China’s Foreign Minister, on March 6<sup>th</sup>. In this cable, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Molotov raises several questions and suggestions. He for example advises to discuss other questions than the ones related to the conference; he also provides information on the formal setting of the conference, such as participating members and facilities. But more importantly, point 8 of the cable mentions that “Comrade Molotov will ask Comrade Gromyko [Soviet Deputy Foreign

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 13.

Minister] and others to make presentation to [China] on matters needing attention in attending an international conference”.<sup>50</sup> Such a statement shows a quite intimate relation between the two regimes. Despite the lack of available sources, it can be inferred that the level of coordination and preparation was rather high. Obviously, having such relation prior to the conference could only be beneficial. China was able to arrive prepared, ready to make a “good impression”; and above all, the Communist block was able to display a united front.

### **3.2 Geneva Conference (April 26 – June 15)**

The Geneva Conference started on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1954, nine month after the signing of the Armistice Agreement. The conference was attended, on the Communist side, by the Soviet Union, North Korea and The People’s Republic of China. The allied side was represented by a delegation of sixteen countries, including the United States, South Korea, France and Britain.<sup>51</sup> As we will discuss, the conference was merely a continuation of the Berlin Conference and the ensuing preparations. Eventually, the conference would be considered as a failure. Indeed, no peace agreement was signed, the Armistice Agreement thus remaining in place. In this chapter, we will outline several aspects that led the parties to leave the conference while agreeing to disagree. First, we will overview the position of the allied delegation. Second, we will discuss the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>51</sup> All the participant to the Korean War but South Africa attended the Geneva Conference: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States.

Communist's side position and finally the subsequent negotiations between the two coalitions.

### 3.2.1 Allied Side position

By taking the lead, the United States were facing the difficult task to find a common stance, on which their fifteen allies could agree upon. Even though most of them were willing to follow the U.S. administration's position without challenging, Washington's most influential and important allies, France, Britain and South Korea had their own opinion on the question. Unfortunately, their opinions were not always convergent and they were not ready to compromise too much. On the one side, Syngman Rhee was willing, or at least pretended, to resume war and unify the Korean peninsula by force. On the other side, France and especially Britain were seeking relaxation of tensions in the world and accordingly had no interest in renewed escalations in Korea. In order to be credible at the conference and in the eye of the world's public opinion, the United States would have had to narrow the differences within their camp and show up in Geneva speaking with one voice. This would have been the ideal way, but even the Communist camp knew that the differences were important and did not expect much in terms of unity on the allied side.

Several issues had to be taken into account when planning the position that would be defended at the conference. First of all, and probably the most problematic, was South Korea delaying its attendance's confirmation. While temporizing, Rhee didn't cooperate much with the United States on the strategy to adopt at the conference. South Korea

being the very reason why the conference was hold, it was unimaginable for the United States to adopt a stance that would be categorically refused by Rhee. The lack of formal commitment surely hindered a more effective preparation of the conference, as can be seen in a memorandum by Ambassador Johnson, coordinator for the Geneva Conference, sent on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, three weeks before the beginning of the conference:

*“Over the past weeks we have repeatedly reiterated to the ROKs our desire to honor our commitment to consult with them prior to consulting with anyone else concerning positions to be taken at the Conference and the difficulty of doing so until they have reached a decision on whether to attend. Last week we informed the ROK that in view of the very short time before the Conference we could no longer delay consulting with other member of the Allied side. The ROK expressed no objection and merely asked to be kept informed of the results”.*<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, through their correspondence with Seoul, the United States were able to deduct some elements relevant to the drafting of a position paper and approximately figure out the limits Rhee would not be willing to cross. One of the important points Rhee was holding to, was the withdrawal of Chinese forces from the Korean peninsula. He was also favoring an extension of ROK authority over North Korea and new elections

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<sup>52</sup> “Memorandum by the Coordinator for the Geneva Conference (Johnson) to the Acting Secretary of State (Smith)”, April 12, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. V XI, 93.

only in the North. However, the European parties of the Allied were reluctant to embrace such a stance, Britain even “[expressed] strong opposition to [such a] position even as an opening tactical maneuver”.<sup>53</sup> In regard to these opposing views on how to reach an agreement, the United States drafted three different plans:<sup>54</sup>

- *Plan A – Administrative incorporation of North Korea into the Existing Republic of Korea.*

According to this plan, new elections would only be hold in North Korea. The Rhee government would remain in power and the ROK constitution would be extended to the North. All these steps would be supervised and verified by the UN.

- *Plan B – Elections in North and South Korea for Establishment of Korean National Government within the ROK Constitutional structure.*

The key elements of Plan B include election throughout the Korean Peninsula. The ROK constitution would remain, but the Assembly as well as the President would have to be reelected. The Assembly would be elected based on the population ratio between South and North and election would be monitored by the UN, similarly as under Plan A.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> “Memorandum by the Technical Secretary, United States Delegation at the Geneva Conference (Van Hollen)”, April 24, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI 93, 131-139.

- *Plan C – All Korean Elections for Constituent Assembly, New Government and New national Government.*

Plan C foresees the dissolution of both the government and constitution of the ROK.

Once dissolved, new country-wide elections would elect a constituent assembly, in order to create a new constitution and a new state.

The initial goal was to sell Plan A to the South Korean, as it was the one they would most probably endorse. However, this plan had only little chance to be endorsed by the other allies. Plan C was meant to target the European fringe of the block but was assessed as having no chance to convince South Korea. Plan B was thought to be the one with the most chance to get approval from both the ROK and other allies. Accordingly, the strategy was to sell Plan A to the ROK and try to work it towards accepting Plan B. In regard to their other allies, the United States were planning to, in a first stage, make them officially endorse the ROK's position and in a second stage fully back Plan B, once Plan A was in a "hopelessly deadlock".<sup>55</sup> Plan C would be kept in reserve, should the communist side show genuine interest to find a peaceful solution. The reason to start negotiating with Plan A was twofold. First, it is the Plan that South Korea was most likely to endorse. In other words, putting forward another plan would encompass the risk that Rhee backs off the conference, as the terms were not favorable to him. In a special briefing meeting preceding the conference, Dulles brought it to the point:

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 139

*“There was of course no possibility of accomplishing the desired result except in terms acceptable to the ROK. The conference could not impose a settlement on the ROK which is rejected. As the subject of the conference, the views of the ROK were entitled to carry a great measure of weight”.*<sup>56</sup>

Second, by advancing Plan A first, the United States let some room for negotiation open. Should they have started by negotiating their best alternative, they would have lacked the necessary leverage to eventually reach any kind of agreement. Furthermore, starting with an “unfavorable” or “unrealistic” position would allow them to hide their strategy and get to know their opponent’s point of view and potential moves. Getting this precious information would allow the United States to adapt their strategies and seek a more favorable agreement. This was at least the plan.

### 3.2.2 Communist side position

On the Communist side, the coordination seemed to have been much better, as can be read from Zhou Enlai’s telegram to Mao on the day of the conference’s beginning. In this cable, he refers to the contact he had with his Soviet comrades over the two previous days, and where they finalized the order of the speakers as well as the content of their declaration:

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<sup>56</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation by Elizabeth Brown of the Office of the United Nations Political and Security Affairs”, April 20, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. V XI, 124.

*“The Korean delegation [should] speak first. Moreover, in their first speech the Korean delegation should present the plans to reunify Korea by peaceful means, withdraw all foreign troops, and oblige major countries (who are directly involved in the war) to ensure and help to bring about Korea’s peaceful reunification. China and the Soviet Union should, in turn, express their support for the Korean delegation’s position one day after they speak”.*<sup>57</sup>

The communist position was thus made aware to the plenum on April 27<sup>th</sup>, by Nam Il, North Korea’s Minister for Foreign Affairs. In his proposal, Nam Il, among others, specified the following requirements<sup>58</sup>:

- Formation of an all-Korean Commission composed of representatives of North and South Korea to be elected by their respective assemblies, and including representatives of the “largest democratic social organization”;
- The drafting by this commission of an electoral law preparatory to the holding of all-Korean elections for a National Assembly to form a united Korea Government;
- Measures taken by the Commission to establish and develop economic and cultural ties between North and South Korea;
- The withdrawal of all foreign military forces from Korean territory within six months;

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<sup>57</sup> Chen Jian, Zhihua Shen, 15-16.

<sup>58</sup> Department of State, *The Korean Problem at the Geneva Conference: April 26 – June 15, 1954*, 11.

- A guarantee of “the peaceful development of Korea” by “those countries most interested in the maintenance of peace in the Far East”.

In his May 3<sup>rd</sup> statement, Nam Il further added regarding the all-Korean Commission, that the decisions taken within this body, “it goes without saying, should be adopted by mutual agreement”.<sup>59</sup> In other words, both parties would have a veto-right, which was against the Allied understanding of “free elections”.

### 3.2.3 Negotiations

With the initial positions laid out, the debates could start. However, without much surprise, the positions would not change much over the conference. When comparing United States’ Plan A and Nam Il’s April 27<sup>th</sup> proposal, we can identify at least two major points of contention, around which most of the discussions revolved. The first one was related to the issue of elections. None of the coalition was willing to risk losing elections, or even gets its power eroded. On the Allied side, Plan A proposed election under UN supervision only in North Korea, while Rhee’s regime in the South would stay in place. This option was obviously not acceptable for the communist side, which would lose all grips on the Korean Peninsula. Even Plan B, where election would be hold throughout the Peninsula, but under UN supervision and by adopting the ROK constitution, didn’t have much chance to convince. On the one hand, the Communist

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 63.

block was not willing to let the UN be alone in charge of the good progress of the election and was also not willing to adopt the ROK constitution as such. On the other hand, it seemed also very difficult for the United States to sell plan B -or even C- to Rhee. Because such a plan meant the holding of new election, assuming they would have been free and fair, the outcome was far from being sure and likely to undermine Rhee's political power. While some sources assessed that anti-communist votes would prevail in Southern Korea, it would not necessarily be in Rhee's favor.<sup>60</sup> On the Communist side, Nam Il's proposal included the presence of an all-Korean commission, where decisions would be taken based on mutual agreement. With such a veto-power, it seems clear that no decision (un)favorable to either side could ever be taken. The insurance that voting results could simply be vetoed was obviously not acceptable for the Allied side. Indeed, such a system was all but in line with free and fair elections extoll by the United States and its followers. The second point of contention was linked to the withdrawal of foreign military forces. Indeed, the understanding of who was to be considered as such differed depending on which side of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel one was. From an Allied side perspective, "all foreign troops" mainly meant Chinese troops. Rhee made the withdrawal of China's military personnel a prerequisite to any kind of elections.<sup>61</sup> The United States didn't trust increased communist presence, which they perceived as a threat for fair elections as well as security. From a Communist perspective however, the presence of UN troops was not considered positively. As a party to the Korean War, the

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<sup>60</sup> Henry W. Brands, 74.

<sup>61</sup> "Briggs to Dept. State", April 24, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. V XI, 146.

UN was perceived as allied to the United States. Accordingly, letting the UN alone supervise the elections was a non-sense in communist eyes. The presence of “neutrals” was mentioned, but the Allied block opposed, arguing that there is no such thing as “neutral nations” on the communist side.

With position as far apart and the limited flexibility at hand, making any concessions between East and West was almost impossible. What was even more interesting however, was Rhee’s intransigence, as he was not willing to compromise more than what he already did. Didn’t he already agree on the Armistice Agreement and his attendance at the Geneva Conference? In direct line of his behavior pre-conference, Rhee kept hindering any progress. Even though he agreed to send a delegation to Geneva, he didn’t agree to “sell off” his power and country. Accordingly, he showed only little motivation to cooperate towards goals he didn’t want to reach. A day after the conference started and Pyun stated the Korean position, in line with U.S. Plan A, Rhee told the U.S. Ambassador to Korea that he would not be able to compromise any more. Faced with the possibility to have to whittle down his initial stance, he “emotionally and tearfully pleaded for permission to allow Korean delegation to come home”.<sup>62</sup> In this situation, it took almost a week to the United States to mention Plan B to Rhee. When Briggs introduced Plan B to Rhee on May 7<sup>th</sup>, his reaction was as expected, all in character. First of all, he “did not understand that having supported them on Plan A we are now moving to Plan B in order to achieve unity at Geneva when we do not believe Communists will

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<sup>62</sup> “Briggs to United States Delegation”, April 30, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. V XI, 169.

accept Plan B”.<sup>63</sup> Even though he did listen carefully and was “very mild and pleasant throughout [the discussion]”<sup>64</sup> he made it clear that in his opinion, elections could only be held after the complete withdrawal of the Chinese forces as well as the withdrawal or complete surrender of North Korean armed forces. Such a hard-liner stance made it impossible to move from Plan A to Plan B. And above all, was a totally unrealistic demand, as observed by U.S. Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith:

*“It is difficult to see how we can, with straight face, join Rhee in seeking to impose terms of a conqueror –unconditional withdrawal of Chinese Communist troops, surrender North Korean Army to ROK, leaving ROK in military control of North Korea before election and unification. Little more could be demanded if we had won military victory rather than stalemate”.*<sup>65</sup>

Rhee’s insistence on complete withdrawal of Chinese and North Korean military forces can be explained in two ways. First, it can be seen as a bargaining technic. By taking a hard stance and showing inflexibility, he put the United States under pressure. While they could delay an answer or try to bargain his position down, eventually, they were the ones willing to reach a goal. Rhee was holding the carrot and as such, setting the terms of the bargain. By temporizing, he hoped to eventually reach a better commitment on

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<sup>63</sup> “Dean-Briggs-Rhee Meeting, Seoul May 7, Morning: Briggs to United States Delegation”, May 7, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 217.

<sup>64</sup> “Briggs to United States Delegation”, May 3, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 192.

<sup>65</sup> “Smith to Embassy in Korea”, May 11, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 249.

military support from the United States. Second, a complete withdrawal on the Communist side would necessarily mean a simultaneous withdrawal of United Nation forces south of the Peninsula. Such a scenario would understandably delight Rhee, as the UN was checking any South Korean's bad temper. In other words, Rhee might have believed that without any foreign forces on the Peninsula coupled with a strong U.S. defense commitment, he would be able to unify Korea by force. The threat of unilateral attack on North Korea was anyway a recurring occurrence in Rhee's discourse. In his May 7<sup>th</sup> talk with Briggs, he further continued to "emphasize futility further negotiation at Geneva [and added that there] was no point to unification if immediately thereafter Communists would come South, and emphasized that if Eisenhower government gave him military divisions and logistical support he needed, he would promise not to attack Communists in north if they did not attempt to come south".<sup>66</sup> Such a declaration might even sound surprising in regard to his usual stance and brinkmanship. Indeed, a day earlier, he mentioned that the only possible solution to solve the Korean question was for the U.S. to "augment ROK armed forces to such an extent that they could freely move north and annihilate Communist forces".<sup>67</sup> From his point of view, the United States "did not have the courage to fight Communists and therefore he would have to stand alone".<sup>68</sup> Moreover, as they were to abandon Korea anyway, they should just leave right away and

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<sup>66</sup> "Briggs to United States Delegation", May 3, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 193.

<sup>67</sup> "Ninth Plenary Session on Korea, Geneva, May 11: the United States Delegation to Dept. State", May 11, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 251.

<sup>68</sup> "Dean-Briggs-Rhee Meeting, Seoul May 10, Morning: Briggs to Dept. State", May 10, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 241.

let him fight the Communists alone.<sup>69</sup> Clearly, Rhee was not willing to soften his stance on the question, or at least not without extracting substantial assets from the United States. He was furthermore confident the U.S. would surrender to his demands. Thus, when asked about a possible withdrawal of UN forces, Rhee was cited as being “so positive he is going to get entire asking price for complete build-up of Korean divisions this does not bother him in slightest and in fact he looks forward to day. He spoke with great bitterness fact he had not been allowed to move because we United States locked up ammunition and gasoline”.<sup>70</sup>

Rhee’s stubbornness was however slowly paying off. On May 8<sup>th</sup>, the French surrendered in Dien Bien Phu. While not surprising, the fall of Indochina to the Communists induced a shift in Western strategic thinking. The risk of further countries falling to communism was anchored in U.S. politicians’ mind. Now that Indochina fell, the importance of South Korea accordingly grew. From the initial strategy of moving from Plan A to Plan B in order to come closer to a European support, the U.S. position tended to harden. In regard to possible future conflicts in Asia, the United States had to secure the collaboration of their allies in the region, as mentioned by Dulles on May 10<sup>th</sup>:

*“In views of our desire to develop a strong anti-communist position, with particular relation to Indochina, and the prospect that we might still*

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<sup>69</sup> “Briggs to United States Delegation”, May 12, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 258.

<sup>70</sup> Dean-Briggs-Rhee Meeting, Seoul May 7, Morning: Briggs to United States Delegation”, May 7, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 216.

*intervene there and that this might involve a clash with Communist China, I think it important that we basically follow a line which will keep the confidence of our anti-Communist allies in Asia rather than seem to be working against them with a view to winning favor of Western European countries which are not disposed to be very helpful to us in Asia".<sup>71</sup>*

Feeling that the fall of Dien Bien Phu was playing to his advantage, Rhee became more assertive, stating that he wanted "full commitments for 35 divisions and equipment and UN withdrawal so he can attack alone or by using every artifice at his command he wants to evoke situation designed to bring about unprovoked attack by Communists; in which event, we [United States] are bound come to his aid".<sup>72</sup> Voluntarily putting the bar high, he showed that he was not inclined to lower his stance. He furthermore kept maintaining that discussions in Geneva were a waste of time and that he needed the United States' secret and written guarantee they would support him to invade North Korea once the Chinese forces withdrew.<sup>73</sup> After almost one month of negotiation, he again asserted that he would never under any circumstances accept election unless all Chinese troops withdrew and the North Korean army either withdrew or surrendered.<sup>74</sup> In other words, his position didn't change at all since the beginning of the Conference's preparation. On the contrary, his stance hardened since the fall of Dien Bien Phu, as assessed by Briggs

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<sup>71</sup> "Dulles to United States Delegation", May 10, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi., 242-243.

<sup>72</sup> "Briggs to United States Delegation", May 12, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 258-259.

<sup>73</sup> "Briggs to United States Delegation", May 19, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 286.

<sup>74</sup> "Dean-Briggs-Rhee Meeting, Seoul May 21: Briggs to Dept. State", May 21, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 306-309.

in his May 21<sup>st</sup> cable.<sup>75</sup> In the face of such a hardliner position, the United States' delegation was doubting more than ever. Although no one had ever been very optimistic about the outcome of the conference, it seemed clear at that moment that the conference would indeed not produce any outcome. This was maybe the only point on which both Communists and allied agreed. Dulles declared on May 20<sup>th</sup> that "there seems to be little likelihood achieving any political settlement disturbing present *status quo* on any basis that would be acceptable to [the United States] and prevent communist domination all Korea".<sup>76</sup> During a conversation between Smith and Molotov on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, talking about the deep gulf between both sides, Molotov stated that the situation in Korea would "require a great deal of time to produce a solution. He thought that political settlement in Korea would come about possibly as a result of some years of living together [...] and some form of commercial and other contact over a period of time [...] he obviously expect[ed] non [at the conference]".<sup>77</sup> From this point on, both sides were starting to consider how to end the conference, assuming that the impasse would continue. After the refusal of South Korea's 14 points proposal and North Korea's June 5 proposal, it became obvious that no agreement could be found and the priority was to end the conference without taking the blame for its failure. Confronted to the Communist opposition to recognize the UN as a supervisory body and the holding of free election,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> "Dulles to Embassy in the Republic of China", May 20, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 298.

<sup>77</sup> "The United States Delegation to Dept. State", May 22, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXI, 315-316.

the United States and their allies eventually decided to put an end to the conference, issuing the “declaration by the Sixteen” on June 15, 1954.

The conference thus ended without having achieved its initial aim, a peaceful settlement of the Korean question. The reactions were contrasted. The Communist powers seemed to be pretty satisfied from the conference’s outcome. The United States however were not able to confront the Communist bloc as much as they would have wanted to. Nevertheless, they were able to maintain a semblance of unity in their coalition, avoiding the blame of an open division among free world countries. The most tangible gains are however to credit to Syngman Rhee, despite his negative discourse.<sup>78</sup> Having fought the conference from its inception, the failure of the latter not only came as a relief to him but moreover increased his stance towards the United States. Above all, it fulfilled Rhee’s long awaited request of American military aid. The U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty was ratified on November 17, 1954 and USD 700 million worth of economic and military support was provided to the Republic of Korea. Also, even after withdrawing several divisions, 50,000 American troops still stayed stationed in the southern part of the Peninsula.

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<sup>78</sup> See correspondence in *FRUS*, 1954-1954. Korea (in two parts), Vol. XV part 1, 2.

### **3.3 Factors & Reassessment**

What is puzzling about the Geneva Conference is that even though no one really expected anything to happen, almost all the parties which were part of the Armistice Agreement attended the conference. Why did they attend, if they considered that the conference was meant to fail? Especially, why did Rhee send a delegation, even though he had been so strongly opposed to the Armistice and the mere existence of this conference? Several factors can be highlighted to explain such a presence, which will then in turn also shed a light on why the conference eventually “failed”.

#### **3.3.1 Systemic Constraints: Cold War**

First, it is important to understand that the conference is a kid of the early Cold War. In this regard, even with the best will, it would have been almost impossible for any of the blocks to compromise too much, or in other words, it would not have been possible for them to be on the perceived “losing side”. As mentioned, the parties were willing to put an end to the Korea War, the human and economic costs being too high to bear. Putting an end to the conflict was more important than to settle all the political details deriving from such a step. Thus, the settlement of those questions were put in the background and postponed to be settled at a political conference. And therefore, having agreed to hold such a conference, backing out would have been perceived as a sign of weakness in the eye of the world opinion and used as a propaganda tool by the other block. Such a scenario was understandably not an option. Accordingly, the mere international political

and ideological setting was limiting the choices any of the party could make. While neither the Communist nor the Allied side could back off without losing face, they could however have indefinitely postponed the holding of such a conference. None of them would have eventually been held accountable for the failure to organize a conference and none of them would have had to deal with the risk of a potential “failure”, should the conference have ended in a way unfavorable to them. In this regard, it can therefore be perceived as quite surprising that the big four actually pushed for such a conference at the time of the Berlin Conference. Although it took more time than the three months’ timeframe set in the Armistice Agreement, the conference eventually happened.

### 3.3.2 Self-Interested Parties

The second set of factors explaining the willingness of these countries to join the Geneva Conference can be found in each state’s peculiar interest in regional and world politics. Indeed, most of the participants did not have much interest in the Korean Peninsula’s fate. However, not willing to step off, they rather used the political conference to advance their own agenda. Therefore, reaching a peace agreement on the Korean question was only a secondary matter. Reaching one would have been good, as long as one’s own interest were not compromised; unfortunately, these interests were not convergent.

Such a stance can be well illustrated with the available U.S. diplomatic cables. Throughout the conference’s preparation as well as the conference in itself, the Eisenhower administration constantly assessed that it had only little chances to succeed.

In a pre-conference briefing meeting, Dulles stated that fact and further added that “if he were making up a book, he would have to give considerable odds against a successful conference”.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, he added that from the Allied side’s perspective:

*“it was the question whether this conference should be regarded as one which we would try to make succeed in achieving the unity and independence of Korea, or whether as a conference in which we more or less concede in advance that our objective is impossible of achievement and, therefore, look upon it as a conference for propaganda utterances by the two sides”*.<sup>80</sup>

And indeed, the United States used the conference as a plenum to confront the communist side. This is clearly illustrated by the insistence with which the U.S delegation pressed for a two-sided conference, as opposed to a round table. It was about confronting the Communists against the free world. Consequently, they also refused the presence of “neutrals” on the communist side, as they wanted the Soviet Union to share responsibilities of the outcome of the conference. For the United States, the main objective of the conference was to show the image of a unified “free world” coalition, condemning the Communists for their responsibilities in the Korea War.

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<sup>79</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation by Elizabeth Brown of the Office of the United Nations Political and Security Affairs”, April 20, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXi, 122.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

France's main interest resided in the Indochina chapter of the conference. Thus, the French delegation was not much involved in the discussions over the Korea question as is reported by Zhou Enlai: "although Bidault French Foreign Minister is usually the least interested in the Korean issue, he suddenly became active at this meeting in order to obtain more votes when the French Parliament decides on the motion of confidence on the 12<sup>th</sup>".<sup>81</sup> Following a debate on Indochina, the French parliament refused the motion of confidence. Anyhow, this example illustrates well the fact that for France, the Korea chapter of the conference was used as a platform to create and foster contacts in view of the Indochina chapter. Other than that, in the broad lines, France was following the United States' lead on the Korea part.

The Soviet Union and Great Britain shared a similar objective, as they both were using the conference as a way to relax world tensions.<sup>82</sup> Obviously, the Soviet Union also had a major interest in promoting their Communist values and show a united Communist coalition together with China and North Korea. Making good figure at the conference would moreover enable them to undermine the United States' status as "good" power. Great Britain was trying to maintain its special relationship with Washington as well as its status as an international power. These two elements were however challenged by the United States post-World War II hegemony. Facing this new reality, London was trying to find a new independent foreign policy line, and the Geneva Conference was a

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<sup>81</sup> Chen Jian, *Zhihua Shen*, 42.

<sup>82</sup> Jong Yil Ra, 403.

welcomed opportunity to roll out its new diplomatic strategy.<sup>83</sup> In this regard, engaging all parties and playing a role of mediator or intermediate would enhance Britain's stance on the international stage.

The Geneva Conference was a valuable opportunity for People's Republic of China to gain visibility in an international forum. Hence, Beijing's regime saw two main benefits that could be gained from this event. First, it was a great showcase to promote their views and values. This conference was an opportunity to present the world with a renewed China and as such, Zhou Enlai made it clear that China had to make all it could to be successful in Geneva. Second, the conference proved to be an adequate platform to establish contacts with foreign powers, especially France and Britain. By establishing and maintaining such relations, China was aiming to be perceived and considered by the rest of the world as a rising power. Moreover, creating such ties would allow them to mitigate the chances of embargo by the United States.<sup>84</sup>

The South Korean case is probably the most interesting. Rhee was against the Armistice Agreement, which he profoundly despised. So was he with the Geneva Conference. Rhee was a strong nationalist and anti-communist, to whom the unification of the Korean Peninsula was fundamental. No matter how irrational and obsessed he might have been,

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>84</sup> Chen Jian, Zhihua Shen, 12; Shu Guang Zhang, "Constructing 'Peaceful Coexistence': China's diplomacy toward the Geneva and Bandung Conferences, 1954-55", *Cold War History* 7, no 4 (2007): 509-528.

there was no doubt that he genuinely wished the unification of the two Koreas (under ROK constitution). Yet, he was also lucid, and knew that such a unification could probably not be achieved, at least not peacefully. He also knew that neither the United States nor any other party was willing to resume the war. In this regard, three choices were offered to him. First, he could have rejected any cooperation with the United States, opposed the Armistice Agreement and refused to send a delegation to the Geneva Conference. However should he have adopted such a stance, he would at best have enjoyed a very tense relations with the United States, its main ally and supporter. At worse, he probably would have lost all kinds of military and economic support from the United States. Knowing how poor and ill-equipped the ROK was at that time, such a position would have strongly compromised any other option Rhee could have had in mind. Second, Rhee could have accepted without much noise the American positions. By adopting this line, he would however have been a mere pawn in the United States' game. For sure, the division of Korea would have been enforced and in addition, Rhee would probably not have received as much resources and commitment from the United States. The third option available to Rhee, knowing that his ultimate goal of unification could not be reached, was to adopt a brinkmanship behavior and try to maximize the extraction of resources from its U.S. patron. By walking on a fine line, between reluctant cooperation and asserted opposition, he constantly pushed the limits in order to get as much as he could. The "timing" of world politics also played in his favor. Whereas in the beginning of the 1950s Korea was omitted from the United States' "defense perimeter" defined by Acheson in his Press Club Speech, South Korea became a precious

value over the next years, and especially after the fall of Dien Bien Phu during the Geneva Conference. As much as Korea needed the United States, Rhee knew that the Eisenhower government needed his support in order to confront the Communist bloc. He thus used this leverage to try to gain military and economic assistance. The way Rhee interacted with the American government didn't change much over the years. When the United States notified Rhee that a political conference on the Korean question would be held, he acted pragmatically. Although being opposed to the conference, which he expected would only further confirm and set the division of the peninsula, he knew he had more to gain by "negotiating" a participation rather than flatly opposing it. The fact that the U.S. administration put him in front a *fait accompli* was also an interesting indicator. It can be interpreted as a will from the U.S. side to avoid Rhee negotiating the holding of such an event, due to his known opposition to it, but at the same time, it underlines the need the U.S. had to have South Korea on their side. Accordingly, when came the time to decide either to send a delegation or not to the Geneva Conference, Rhee was in a position to demand more and used this opportunity to secure U.S. commitment, which might otherwise have been harder to get.

While the odds for an agreement were already small before the conference, they didn't get any better in the process leading to it. On the contrary, because the chances were already perceived as low, the different parties used the opportunity of the conference to advance their own agenda. By doing so, however, the gap between the positions was

almost impossible to fill and a peace treaty definitely out of reach. The conference, ending without any agreement, was considered as a failure. But was it really one?

### 3.3.3 Reassessment of the Conference's outcome: a success in failure?

According to main stream perception, the Geneva Conference was a failure. Each coalition tried to put the blame of it on the other's shoulders. The main goal of the conference was to settle the questions related to the Korean problem, in other words to agree on a definitive peace agreement. Therefore, in terms of its official agenda, the conference did indeed fail. However, in regard to the actual motives that brought the parties to attend the conference, can it still be said that the conference failed?

The Soviet Union and Britain came to the conference with the aim to appease world tensions. Although no peace agreement was signed, the status quo remained and a second Korean War could be avoided. The People's Republic of China wanted to gain international exposure as well as establish relations with Western powers. Both objectives were satisfactorily met. Rhee joined the conference in exchange of a U.S. commitment to stock up his armed forces. Such a pledge was eventually fulfilled –thanks to the “failure” of the conference. The United States were maybe the ones who didn't achieve what they were aiming at the conference. Their confrontation with the Communist bloc turned out to be not as neat as they had expected. Whereas the Communist bloc was able to stay united, the coalition lead by the United States showed obvious signs of division. Nevertheless, the ones who maybe lost the most from this conference were the Korean people. Indeed, since the Geneva Conference, the division

of the Korean Peninsula has been settled and the people divided. Nevertheless, differentiating the outcome in function of the actors seems more appropriate than labeling the entire conference as a failure. Most of the actors present at the conference actually benefited from it.

In this regard, the Geneva Conference is an interesting case illustrating the phenomena of avoidance bargaining. According to Wallihan, avoidance bargaining is “the use of negotiation for the purpose of avoiding agreement”.<sup>85</sup> More specifically, the case of South Korea’s behavior at the Geneva Conference is a textbook illustration of demand avoidance.<sup>86</sup> Wallihan defines demand avoidance as following: “when a party prefers the status quo or some other non-negotiation alternatives to any possible gains from negotiation and would, on this basis alone, shun negotiation. However, the would-be avoider faces an external demand to negotiate in good faith”.<sup>87</sup>

Rhee was vehemently opposed to the holding of a conference on the Korean question. Indeed, the success of such a conference would inevitably mean the official division of the Korean Peninsula. In other words, there was no gain Rhee could make out of this conference. Nevertheless, the United States, its main ally and life-line, requested him not only to attend the conference, but also to make good figure, to foster the “free world’s”

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<sup>85</sup> James Wallihan, “Negotiation to Avoid Agreement”, *Negotiation Journal* 14, no. 3 (1998), 257.

<sup>86</sup> Avoidance bargaining is divided into demand avoidance and opportunistic avoidance. For further information about opportunistic avoidance, see Wallihan, 1998, 261.

<sup>87</sup> James Wallihan, 259.

cause in its fight against communism. Yet, Rhee's aim throughout the process was on the one hand to participate at the conference but on the other hand, to ensure that no agreement would be signed. On top of that, he was also trying to extract as much as he could from the United States, especially in order to strengthen its military. However, in order to get what he desired, he had to be credibly perceived as eventually be willing to compromise over certain points. Indeed, should the United States have been dead certain that he would never agree to change his mind, it is probable that they wouldn't have tried so hard to get him to agree on their position but rather tried to coerce him into doing what they wanted. By adopting a hardliner stance but sometimes agreeing to lower his demands, he put himself in a position where a compromise was hard to get, but not impossible. Thus, when Rhee agreed to participate at the Geneva Conference, although the United States doubted that he would be cooperative, they still had hope that eventually, he would become more flexible. Consequently, Rhee was able to manoeuvre well: in the end, he not only maintained the *status quo* on the Korean question, but was also able to secure military and economic support from the United States.

All in all, in light of these examinations, the common idea that "nothing happened" at the Geneva Conference and that it was a failure is rather inaccurate and incomplete. Indeed, the official agenda wasn't reached. However, knowing that the parties to the conference did not (necessarily) attend the conference to settle this official issue, it is difficult to qualify it as a pure failure. It is most surely a failure from an U.S. perspective. However, the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union and Great Britain seem to

have rather benefited from that conference. And so did South Korea. Qualifying the conference as a total success would be too far stretched in regard to the hardship the Korean people have endured since then. Yet, from a South Korea government's perspective, even if unification (under ROK government and laws) would have been the best outcome, the best *possible* outcome, in the context of Cold War and third parties' self-centered interest, might well have been the one achieved. Rhee stayed in power, he got his military beefed-up and was able to gain substantial commitments from the United States.

#### **4. Preserving the Division: Peace talks post Geneva Conference**

The Geneva Conference definitely settled the division of the Korean Peninsula. The demilitarized zone at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel is currently still a flash point in East Asia. Periods of intense tensions and relaxation have succeeded throughout the years. Dialogues to find a solution to the division of Korea have also been hold; this chapter will thus shortly review three peace talks/negotiations and try to highlight similitudes and differences with the Geneva Conference. This chapter does not intend to be comprehensive but rather to draw a few commonalities and lesson learned on which further research can be based on.

#### 4.1 July 4<sup>th</sup> Joint Communiqué

First of all, unification talks were held in 1972 and resulted with the July 4<sup>th</sup> south-North Joint Communiqué. This document was the first to be agreed upon by both North and South Korea since the division of the peninsula. Following bilateral talks between Pyongyang and Seoul, the parties reached an agreement on “three principles as a basis of achieving unification”:<sup>88</sup> (1) unification shall be independent, without the support and/or interference of any third party, (2) unification shall occur through peaceful means and (3) great national unity shall prevail upon idea, ideologies and systems. Furthermore, the parties also agreed on several other measures to foster unification, such as stopping military provocations and slandering, fostering various exchanges or install a direct phone line between Seoul and Pyongyang. Despite all these promising efforts, interpretation of the three principles were diverging on each side of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, hindering any kind of implementation. Nevertheless, it is the establishment of the *yushin* system in South Korea that caused Pyongyang to change its unification strategy. Indeed, it seems that at first, North Korea believed that the dialogue with Seoul would enable them to take influence over, and undermine the Park Chung-Hee regime. Through the dialogue, North Korea wanted to involve South Korea’s opposition parties and anti-park forces to create a negotiation structure favorable to them. However, with the establishment of the *yushin* system, Park Chung-Hee was able to totally control the

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<sup>88</sup> July 4 South-North Joint Communiqué, 4 July 1972.

opposition, thus annihilating Pyongyang's original plan.<sup>89</sup> The fact that North Korea tried to use the North-South dialogue in order to isolate Park Chung-Hee and gain leverage in the South is documented in further cables.<sup>90</sup> What is interesting to us is that both South and North Korea used the dialogue to achieve other goals. As mentioned, North Korea wanted to gain influence in the South in order to eventually be able to achieve unification, but under communist regime. It seems doubtful that Kim Il-Sung would have actually agreed to any kind of unification under ROK rules. On the other hand, in the South, Park Chung-Hee was having a troubled relation with its ally the United States. Facing U.S. unilateralism, holding such a dialogue and achieving such an agreement without the U.S. involvement was a strong sign that he could play by its own. And again, President Park was unlikely to commit to the agreement, shouldn't he have fully benefited from it. In other words, both Pyongyang and Seoul joined the talks and agreement with ulterior self-interested motives, as happened during the Geneva Conference.

#### **4.2 Inter-Korean Summits (2000, 2007)**

The first inter-Korean summit was held in 2000. The result of this summit is the June 15 North-south declaration. Among other points, the importance of independent unification

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<sup>89</sup> "Telegram from Pyongyang to Bucharest", no. 061072, March 1, 1973 *in* DPRK Perspectives on Korean Unification after the July 4<sup>th</sup> Joint Communiqué, NKIDP E-Dossier no. 10, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, p. 6-8.

<sup>90</sup> See document No. 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 13, 21, 22 *in* DPRK Perspectives on Korean Unification after the July 4<sup>th</sup> Joint Communiqué, NKIDP E-Dossier no. 10, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

is again stated and specified by mentioning “common element in the South's concept of a confederation and the North's formula for a loose form of federation”.<sup>91</sup> This summit was at first considered as a historical event and South Korea's President, Kim Dae-Jung, won a Nobel Peace Prize for his engagement towards North Korea. Nevertheless, less than two years after the holding of the summit, in February 2003, the press echoed information that the South Korean government made secret payments to Pyongyang in order to secure the positive outcome of the summit, naming the event the “cash-for-summit scandal”.<sup>92</sup> This pattern is similar to the Geneva Conference and the July 4 Joint Communiqué. The summit was merely a way to disguise each party's real intentions. It is undoubtable that Kim Dae-Jung strongly believed in engagement toward North Korea. However, he must have known that the goal he was aiming at were not achievable and therefore, rigging the summit's outcome was a way for him to gain domestic and international recognition for his Sunshine policy. North Korea, on the other hand, was certainly not willing to give in too much. However, facing constant economic, political and humanitarian hardships, such a bargain was ideal in order to bring some assets to the regime. The 2007 inter-Korean summit also exhibits similarities. The resulting peace declaration mentions among others, the necessity to end the armistice agreement and the establishment of a permanent peace treaty, the ease of military tensions and the development of cooperation in several areas between the two countries. Obviously, nothing of these happened. As has been seen in North Korean behavior in the previous

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<sup>91</sup> South-North Joint Declaration, June 15, 2000, Art 2.

<sup>92</sup> South Korea convicts six over summit, BBC News, September 26, 2003.

years, such summits were rather good opportunities to secure humanitarian aid and economic cooperation with South Korea. Although official archives are not available, it seems therefore dubious that Pyongyang genuinely considered such moves toward unification.

### **4.3 Geneva Conference and peace regime on the Korea Peninsula**

The 1954 Geneva Conference, the July 4 Joint Communiqué, the 2000 and 2007 inter-Korean summit all have a similarity: the official aim of the negotiation was to find a way to sign a peace treaty and unify the two Koreas. And all of them –in regard to this official goal- failed. Interestingly, it is possible to apply the findings regarding the 1954 Geneva Conference to the subsequent peace talks. The international context plays a fundamental role in defining each party's room for negotiation. In 1972, in the middle of the Cold War, it seems unlikely that either of the side would compromise to the other. Not only were they not willing to, but their respective allies would have eventually hindered it. Even though the Cold War ended, the international setting still plays a major defining role nowadays. Unification on the Korean peninsula would have major implication in North East Asia and several major powers in the region only see a limited interest in such an event. Should both Koreas unify, China would find itself with competing powers on its border. Conversely, a unified Korea might weaken the U.S.-ROK alliance. But above all, deriving from these international constraints, each party came to the negotiations with their own interests, as highlighted previously. Accordingly, genuinely agreeing on a peace treaty seems to be an almost impossible task. Putting the two Koreas

at the same table to negotiate a peace treaty did not produce a substantive and long lasting result. Each side comes with opposite and inflexible position, were a middle ground cannot be found.

In this regard, it is questionable if holding discussion to settle the Korean division and sign a peace treaty is a meaningful way to achieve a peaceful situation on the Korean peninsula. The implication is that it rather seems appropriate to focus first on establishing a peace regime, by fostering for example economic relations between the two countries, before trying to eventually gradually reach unification. To close the circle, it can be enlightening to remember Molotov and Smith's discussion during the Geneva Conference:

*“A period of living together and some form of commercial or other contact over a period of time might reduce the bitterness and permit some political solution”.*<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> “The United States Delegation to Dept. State”, May 22, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952 – 1954, vol. VXL, 315-316.

## **5. Conclusion**

Despite being a critical event in modern Korean history, the 1954 Geneva Conference's Korea chapter has been understudied. This thesis tried to fill the gap by providing a historical analysis of this event. The Geneva Conference's main goal was to find a peaceful settlement of the Korean question. However, no peace or unification agreement could be agreed upon and the conference has therefore been considered as a failure. The aim of this paper was thus to outline factors that are able to explain this failure. After providing a few background information on the initial division of the Korean Peninsula following World War II, we covered the process leading to the conference as well as the conference in itself. By analyzing the international context, the interaction between and within the coalitions, we were able to find out that the outcome of the conference was strongly influenced by two main factors. First, the international context of the Cold War set rigid constraints on each country, limiting their effective room for compromise. Second, each country came to the conference not in order to solve the issue on the Korean Peninsula, but rather to pursue their own non-converging self-interests. Consequently, the chances to reach any kind of peaceful solution to the Korean problem were almost inexistent. Nevertheless, if we assess the outcome of the conference in regard to these two factors, we realize that the conference wasn't actually a failure, as most parties were able to reach their hidden objectives. This thesis also highlighted some similarities between the Geneva Conference and further peace talks, such as the 1972 Pyongyang summit or the 2000 and 2007 inter-Korean summits. It is made apparent that the main

motives for the parties to participate in these talks were not the ones officially put forward, but rather, again, hidden goals, aimed at benefiting each party individually. Obviously, the lack of archives on the communist side might give us a slightly incomplete picture. The release of those archives in the future will surely contribute to depict a much more precise representation of what happened at the Geneva Conference and the motives underlying these events. Nevertheless, we believe that the overall appreciation, based on the currently available resources, is a rather accurate account of the event that unfold in 1954. According to a popular saying, History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. Following the pattern of the four peace talks covered in this paper, it seems unlikely that a peace treaty will be achieved through high level peace talks. Rather, progressive and continuous engagement, leading to a de facto peace regime on the Korean Peninsula might more likely result, eventually, in a peace treaty.

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## 국문 초록

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이 논문은 1954년도의 제네바 정치회담에 관한 역사적 분석에 초점을 맞추었다. 이 회담의 결렬로 인해, 제네바 회담 당사국들은 1953년에 체결된 한국휴전협정을 이행시키고, 이로 인해 한반도는 분단상태로 남게 된다. 동북아시아를 넘어 국제적으로 제네바 회담이 가지는 중요한 의미에도 불구하고, 이 회담에 대한 많은 연구가 진행되지 못하였다. 따라서, 이 논문은 제네바 회담의 실패에 이르기까지의 주요 사건 쟁점과 당사국들의 관계를 연대순으로 분석함으로써 두 가지의 실패 요인을 도출하였다. 즉, 냉전시대 이후의 국제정치의 구조적 조건과 기본적으로 다른 태도가 이에 해당한다. 또한, 이 논문은 제네바 회담이 한반도 뿐만 아니라 대부분의 주요 국가들의 안보적, 정치적 그리고 경제적인 혜택을 가져왔음을 주장한다.

주요어: 1954년 제네바 정치회담, 한국전쟁, 휴전협정

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