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"The Role of India on the Prisoners of the Korean War"

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I. Introduction

With the end of the Second World War, Korea and India were liberated from colonial rule, on 15 August, 1945 and 15 August, 1947 respectively. Therefore, both the countries celebrate their independence day on the same day, 15 August. Simultaneously with independence both the newly emergent nations were faced by partition. According to a famous Korean saying, suffers sympathize with each other. In this sense, India was concerned about the division of the Korean peninsula along the 38th parallel by the US and USSR. India, as a member of UNCTOK and UNCOK, played an important role on the question of Korean independence. India argued in the UN that the independence of the whole of Korea must be granted to Korea as an integral unit. Unfortunately India's efforts, however, ended up with the outbreak of the Korean War.

II. India's Stand on the Korean War

The land of morning calm turned into a land of morning storm on 25 June, 1950. The Korean war, in which North Korea attacked South Korea without warning at dawn, was a civil and local war between the two halves of Korea. As the Korean War broke out on 25 June, 1950, a special meeting of the Security Council of the UN was called. The council adopted the first resolution on 25 June which called for a cease-fire and a North Korean withdrawal to the 38th parallel. The council also recommended that the members of the UN furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea, South Korea, as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace in the area. For the first time in history an international body voted force to meet force.

India played a dynamic role on the Korean crisis as the leader of the nonaligned nations. India condemned North Korea as an aggressor supporting the UN resolutions of 25 and 27 June on the crisis. However, India did not support the UN resolution

for the military assistance to South Korea. India hesitated to involve itself in a military commitment against an Asian country. Instead of this, however, India gave its moral support for the UN action and sent a medical unit to Korea.

It is clear that for the first time, India refused the US sponsored UN resolution on the question of Korea. There were three reasons in the India's stand on the resolution creating a UN Command for Korea. First, India felt that military assistance was beyond her capacity. India stated at the UN on 28 July, that the structure and organization of the Indian armed forces was designed for home defense and that the internal needs at the time were such that India could not afford to send any those forces to remote areas out of India. Second, at that time, India wanted to cultivate friendship with China. India thought that its acceptance of the resolution would make it a party to the war because the Korean crisis was becoming a part of rivalry between the two super powers. India argued that instead of the Nationalist China, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China should represent China in the UN for an early peaceful settlement of the Korean War. And it also did not vote in favor of the resolution which named China as an aggressor. Third, at that time, India was too busy with its own socio-economic problems to participate in the war. For her socio-economic development, India needed peace, especially in Asia. As India wanted to localize the Korean war, it opposed the US sponsored UN resolution to permit the UN forces to cross the 38th parallel into North Korea.

India worried that if the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, China would intervene in the war in full force. Unfortunately, it was happened and thereafter, the US government called upon the UN to condemn China as an aggressor. From the mid-1951 to the mid-1952, India paid little attention to the Korean issue which assumed new dimensions after the branding of China as an aggressor.

III. India's effort to settle the Prisoners-of-War-Issue.

The armistice negotiations between the military commanders of the opposing sides of the Korean peninsula were held up over the question of exchange and repatriation of prisoners of war. In the meantime, as discussion continued on these proposals, the United States Government, through Chester Bowles, the American Ambassador in India, suggested unofficially to the Indian Prime Minister, J. Nehru, to take "initiative" in further efforts to reach an armistice.¹ Therefore, India, along with the rest of its Afro-Asian group drafted a compromise resolution which was submitted to the General Assembly on 17 November, 1952 by the Indian delegate V.

¹ Chester Bowles, *Ambassador's Report*, London, 1954, p.242

K. Krishna Menon.² The resolution was as follows:

1. All prisoners of war should be released and repatriated in accordance with the Geneva Convention in respect of the treatment of prisoners of war dated 12 August, 1949, in accordance with well-established international practice, with the principles of international law, and with the relevant provisions of the draft Armistice Agreement.
2. No force should be used against the prisoners of war to prevent or affect their return to their homes. They should be treated in accordance with the specific provision of the Geneva Convention and with the general spirit thereof.³

Krishna Menon explained on 1 December, 1952 that the draft resolution ensured the freedom of choice of the prisoners in the matter of repatriation by providing for the exercise of that right before the Repatriation Commission.⁴

This resolution, after certain amendments was adopted by the First Committee of the General Assembly on 1 December, 1952 by a vote of 53 to 5.⁵ But this resolution was not going smoothly between the two parties. India's move was criticized by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. They went to the extent of indicating that India has acted under the pressure of the United States.⁶

However, India continually tried to break the deadlock. The proposal made by it in the General Assembly on 12 December 1952 in regard to the repatriation of the prisoners of war presented on opportunities on opportunity to the two parties to reiterate their demands. The U.S. and its allies remodeled India's proposal to suit their own purpose. Russia and China, on the other hand, rejected it.⁷

On 2 February, 1953, President Eisen-hower, in his speech on the state of the Union to Congress, pointed out that the U.S. seventh Fleet would no longer be employed to "shield" Communist China.⁸ It was purposely leaked to the Communist that America would not hesitate to use atomic weapons in the Korean War and this had its desired effect.⁹ Nehru expressed his concern on 3 February 1953 that the American posture might result in extending the area of conflict.¹⁰ Realizing that America was now getting impatient and knowing that it was capable of carrying out its threat, the Communists decided to end the war.¹¹ In February 1953 General Mark Clark, the U.N.

² U.N. Doc. A/C. 1/723.

³ UN General Assembly Official Records(GAOR), Sess. 7, Cttee 1, p.112,

⁴ For Menon's Observations on the India Resolution, See GAOR, Sess., 7 Cttee, Agenda Item 16 (a), pp. 173-7.

⁵ GAOR, Sess 1, Cttee 1, Mtg 535, p. 1890.

⁶ *The Statesman*, Delhi, 30. November 1952.

⁷ Kaushik, R.P., *The Crucial years of Non-Alignment: USA, Korean War and India*, Kumar Brothers, New Delhi, 1972, p. 211.

⁸ Department of State Bulletin, Vol 28, 9 February 1953, p. 509.

⁹ Edgan O' Balance, *Korea: 1950-53*, London, 1969, p. 132.

¹⁰ *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 4 February 1953.

¹¹ Edgan O'Balance, *Korea: 1950-53*, Op. Cit., p. 132.

Commander-in-Chief, sent a letter to the Communist commander. In this letter he indicated his readiness to repatriate the sick and the wounded in U.N. custody, and asked if the Command was ready to do likewise. On 28 March 1953, the Communists accepted the U.N. offer, and added that a settlement of this question "should be made (so as) to lead to the smooth settlement of the entire question of prisoners of war."¹² Regarding these developments, India urged the U.N. to persevere in its effort to keep the negotiations going.¹³

India's effort was gradually recognized by the two blocs. Both the parties supported India's membership of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC). The agreement on the repatriation of the prisoners was signed on 1 June, 1953.¹⁴ The agreement was very similar with the proposals made by India earlier. The armistice was accepted on 27 July, 1953.

IV. India's Role in the NNRC

The NNRC was composed of Sweden, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and India. South Korea was unhappy over India's association with the NNRC and vehemently opposed Indian troops landing in South Korea.¹⁵ But it could not act against the U.N. decision. South Korea regarded India as pro-communist and as such even threatened the use of force to stop the Indians from landing in Korea, i.e. ROK.¹⁶

India's reaction to the President of South Korea, Rhee's action was to demand a guarantee from the U.N. Command and U.S. for the safety of Indian troops.¹⁷ Nehru said on 6 July, 1953 that if the United Nations could not assert its position and implement its decision, the consequences arising there from would be detrimental to the future of the United Nations. He urged the U.N. in a resolution passed by the Indian National Congress on 6-17 July 1953, to uphold the Armistice Agreement.¹⁸ The Indian Advance Mission headed by R.K. Nehru left for Korea via Japan on 5 August 1953 and arrived in Korea on 9 August 1953. They spent 5 days in Korea. R.K. Nehru reported on his return to India that their visit to Pyongyang, capital of North Korea, was a significant experience, adding that "every town on the way has been destroyed and Pyongyang itself is a devastated city." He observed that the "Government is, however, functioning efficiently and repair and reconstruction work is going on everywhere."¹⁹ In his report, R.K. Nehru also says that there is a vast concentration of aircraft and motor transport on the U.N. side. The American

¹² Department of State Bulletin, Vol. 28, 6 April 1 1953, 1953, pp. 494-5.

¹³ See Menon's Statement, GAOR, Sess. 7, Plen. Mtg. p.679.

¹⁴ U.N. Bulletin, 15 June 1953, p. 417.

¹⁵ Major General S.P.P. Thorat, *The Custodian Force to India, A cyclostyled report*, Delhi, 7.d., p.3.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Nehru's Statement at a Press Conference, *Hindustan Times*, 10 October, 1953.

¹⁸ See All India Congress Committee, Resolution on Foreign Policy 1947-57, New Delhi, 1959, p. 19.

¹⁹ See R.K. Nehru's Statement at a Press Conference on 24 August, 1953.

soldiers were indeed fighting in luxury. He said that compared to this affluence in the South, the conditions in the Northern side presented a complete contrast.²⁰

The Advance Mission made its recommendations to the Government of India, as a result of which it was decided to send 40 officers, to carry out the supervisory work of the Commission. These officers would function under the leadership of General Thimayya, who would represent India at the NNRC and act as the Executive and Umpire.²¹

A Second responsibility entrusted to India was to provide the Custodial Force of India (CFI) consisting of about 6,000 troops, to implement the repatriation of prisoners. By 24 September the U.N. command completed the handing over of prisoners to the Custody of the NNRC. They were approximately 14,700 Chinese and 7,900 Korean prisoners of war who had refused to return to Communist Control. The Communists made over 23 Americans, 1 British, and 335 ROK prisoners who had refused repatriation.²²

India as the chairman of the NNRC faced several difficulties. The Republic of Korea had not unreservedly accepted its bonafides. Indeed South Korean President, Rhee and his Government doubted on the integrity and impartiality of India in fulfilling its duty.²³ And also, there was difference of opinion within the Commission itself in tackling the problem. Another problem that India had to face was the question of "explanations" and "interview". The two commands were sharply divided on these questions.

There was a suggestion that the Political Conference envisaged in the Armistice Agreement should be allowed to decide what should be done with those prisoners of war who had not yet been interviewed. India agreed. In answer to this the U.N. Command proclaimed that on 23 January, they would release all POWs restored to them. The General said that they would be restored to them all the same.²⁴ With its responsibilities over the NNRC declared its dissolution on 21 February, 1954.²⁵ About 88 ex-prisoners were brought to India after the armistice. Five of them were repatriated later to North Korea and two to China while 55 were sent to Brazil, 11 to Argentina and nine to Mexico, the rest remained in India.²⁶ However, according to one source, now four are staying in India and two returned to South Korea.²⁷

²⁰20 Nehru. R.K., Visit to Korea, cyclostyled report, Secret, Delhi, 19 August, 1953., p.2.

²¹ Ibid, n.8.

²² GAOR, Sess. 7, Supplement No. 19 9A/2642, p.1.

²³ Poonam Abraham, Korean Diary I, *Hindustan Times*, 31 October 1953.

²⁴ White W.L., *The Captives of Korea*, New York, 1957, n. 57, p. 321

²⁵ Pasha Sayed Aziz, Repatriation of Korean Prisoners of War, *Indian Journal of International Law*. Vol. 2, New Delhi, 1962, p. 44.

²⁶ Appadorai A. and Arora v.K., *India in World Affairs*, Sterling Publishers Pvt., Ltd., New Delhi, p. 67. These writers said that in a report on the Korean War, Krishna Menon gave this information.

²⁷ In the interview with the Korean consul in India, Park Sang Yun, 20 October, 1993.

V. Conclusion

The mission entrusted to the NNRC could not evidently be fulfilled completely. Nevertheless, it was meaningful for India. First, the suggestions made by India in regard to the repatriation of prisoners of war formed the basis of the agreement on the subject and eventually led to an Armistice Agreement. Second, India was called upon to take up the Chairmanship and the Executive Agency of the commission, largely because, as a nonaligned country, it had won the confidence of both the parties that it could be expected to act impartially.²⁸

President Syngman Rhee who was initially opposed tooth and nail to the Custodial Force of India later complimented and thanked the CFI at the time of their departure. He said:

"We want to forget unpleasant things about the Indian guards who had done so much under difficult circumstances and want to say good-bye to them with thanks."²⁹

²⁸ Appadorai A. and Rajan M.S. *India's Foreign Policy and Relations*, Op. Cit., p. 557.

²⁹ *New York Times*, 23 January 1954.