The Korean War Studies and Insights from the Bargaining Theory

Anna Efimova
Higher School of Economics University, Russia

Abstract
The paper aims at contributing to the study of the Korean War as an international military conflict. Within the IR theory the bargaining model has recently become one of the most important theories of conflict and war. It has provided important insights into explaining the rules of interactions in which actors choose either to offer up concessions or to go to war (Blainey, Fearon, Powell, Lake, Reiter and others).

Using different variables explaining the causes of war, I show how such variables as incomplete information, misperception, bluffing and credible commitment problem of the parties in conflict – the DPRK, the ROK, the USSR, China and the US – influenced the outbreak of war, the course of combat and the outcomes.

The similar rationalist approach can provide expedient insights for the study of the current conflict over the DPRK policies, providing a more weighted vision of the North Korean objectives and policy.

Introduction
The Korean War was the first military clash of the Cold War, the first international conflict where the UN Security Council intervened, the war waged for political objectives, the civil conflict – the Korean War marked to be distinctive in a variety of ways. The Korean War is widely considered the crucial event to shape the contours of the bipolar rivalry, with regional conflicts treated as cases to demonstrate supremacy by the two superpowers.39

Revealing archival materials has illuminated the research of the Korean War; however its complete and unbiased history still remains an unfinished business and the rivalry on the Korean peninsula is still in place. A comprehensive analysis of the Korean War is therefore indispensable for a complete picture of the today situation in Korea, with the DPRK remaining a real threat to its

neighboring North-East Asian states.

The disclosure of the Soviet (and partially Chinese) archives in the 1990s encouraged new wave of research on the causality of the war, the Korean War despite its pivotal importance has not received ample attention from scholars of international relations that would have produced a broad theoretically informed scholarship. A valuable contribution to the mainstream theories of International Relations, the bargaining theory is able to offer useful theoretical explanations on the outbreak of the war, the course of combat, and the war termination.

1. Bargaining theory and war

Bargaining theory conceptualizes international interactions – cooperation and conflict – as a bargaining process\textsuperscript{40}. This approach has facilitated finding out new sets of explanations for conflict and cooperation. War studies have also been framed within a bargaining context, which allowed clarifying why do wars, although being costly, still occur. The central explanation here is the information issue\textsuperscript{41}. If parties in conflict had complete, open and reliable information about the aims, preferences and revenge of the opposing party, a military clash would be inappropriate and the incentives to negotiate would increase. States are encouraged bluffing or deceiving their opponents in order to strengthen their bargaining positions. As a result, the lack of information and high level of uncertainty about mutual intentions and resources they possess between actors can bring about the war to begin. The fighting phase and the outcomes of battles in the course of a war serve as means to reveal information. Consequently, the conflicting parties regulate their behavior and expectations and get ready to come to an agreement.

2. The causes of war

Rational explanations of why the wars still start apart from their high costs suggest that wars may still be initiated by leaders because the expected outcome and benefits are presumed to be higher than the expected costs. Going to war is any case is a rational choice, sometimes it can prove to be


complete failure as a result of a miscalculation and wrong policy choice the lack of information is always pertinent) or even a political suicide for the particular leader who took the decision. Alternatively, the bargaining theory has demonstrated that a settlement is always mutually preferable to fighting for both parties\textsuperscript{42}.

So far, according to the bargaining model of war, there are three conditions when war as a bargaining failure is possible:

1. \textit{Lack of information (uncertainty)}

Actors possess private information with incentives to hide or misrepresent it. Such information typically regards plans, strategies, and resources of an actor. Due to the lack of complete information an actor can overestimate its own capabilities or the resolve and resources of his opponent and start a war\textsuperscript{43}. Wars are commonly planned and initiated under the conditions of overestimation of one’s own abilities by the attacker, with the majority of wars being planned to be rapid and triumphant military campaigns. However, for the decision to capture enemy by surprise, private information about the war plans should be carefully protected and remain undisclosed. Negotiations in this context are doomed to be a deadlock because the potential aggressor is especially disposed to misrepresentation, while the potential target does not make enough effort to reach a pre-war agreement since, in its own turn, it is also disposed to underestimate the resolve of the potential enemy.

The decision by the DPRK with the support from the Soviet Union to invade the Republic of Korea on June 25, 1950 was motivated by the correct assumption that the opposite side’s forces were significantly weaker and worse organized, and that the USA would not have run to deliver a full military support to Seoul, since Korea had never been within the perimeter of genuine American interest. The Truman administration in the US considered Japan more important than Korea. In 1949, just a few months until the war broke out, the US troops had moved out form Korea, leaving behind only about 500 military advisers, and the Congress rejected to provide South Korea with aid in the upcoming 1950.

The decision by the North Korea to start the war followed both the logic of the preemptive war (first-strike advantage) and was also determined by the challenge of being attacked first by the Republic of Korea and its allies (the logic of preventive war). At the time of the military invasion the North indeed had advantages in terms of military power\textsuperscript{44}. The Soviet troops had also leaved, however the USSR equipped the DPRK’s army with tanks, aircrafts and the Soviet military advisers. Thus the

\textsuperscript{42} Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” 379-414.
\textsuperscript{44} The DPRK army had 175000 people, while the ROK had somewhat less – 93000.
idea to use the first-strike advantage until the military balance was favourable to the DPRK did not look irrational: by August 1950 almost 90% of the South Korean territory was occupied by the North, with the Pusan perimeter remaining the only refuge.

Had the international powers not interfered with the events in Korea, the outcome of the military invasion was determined to be the overwhelming victory of the North Korean army. The later events unrolled in a way that allowed Robert Jervis to name it “an accident”, an event that could not be explained by strategic importance of Korea to make it the first battleground of the Cold War45. The bargaining model of war can offer some plausible explanations regarding the decisions to enter the war that followed. The incomplete list of expectations by different parties, most of which proved to be false misinterpretations, may embrace subsequent positions of the USA, the USSR, and China:

- In Truman’s view Korea was a Soviet test for the American resolve;
- The USA believed that neither the USSR, nor the People's Republic of China would have intervened in the war directly;
- China was alarmed that the US troops might cross the Yalu river and enter Manchuria; a communist regime in the North of the Korean peninsula served as a comfortable buffer zone for China. China decided to enter the war without declaring it;
- The Soviet leadership believed that an attack form the ROK was imminent and took much effort to arm and instruct the North Korean army;
- Stalin when agreeing to the DPRK’s invasion in the South was taking into consideration the weakening interest of the US in the Korean affairs (The US Secretary of state Dean Acheson in January 1950 confirmed that Korea was outside the U.S. defense perimeter in Asia);
- At the same time Stalin felt secure after the Soviet acquisition of the atom bomb and the first nuclear test conducted in August 1949;
- The USSR leadership did not expect a UN Security Council to pass a resolution to intervene;
- The USSR did not expect or hoped that China would intervene in the conflict (Stalin did not consult with the Chinese Mao Zedong before the intervention);
- The US leadership believed that Stalin controlled China, which was false;

The above listed mistaken expectations and misperceptions, mutual misinterpretation of motives by the actors in play may be interpreted as just a dramatic accident or coincidence of events.

45 Jervis “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War,” 588.
The bargaining theory would rather consider these misperceptions (that arose obviously due to the lack of information available to all parties) the causal explanation of why the war started and why each actor finally decided to go to war.

2. **Commitment problems**

The second condition for the outbreak of war is the failure to commit not to fight in the future. In short, when there is no guarantee that one of the two sides would not attack (no credible commitment exists that would reassure both actors), the probability of a war increases. A first-strike advantage may force an actor to begin a preemptive war, or the threat of an imminent attack may cause an actor to start a preventive war. The latter occurs when one actor expects a power shift in favour of the other actor in the future and seeks to use its current advantage while the conditions are still favourable. Both types – preventive and preemptive war – fit into the bargaining model.46

As mentioned above, the DPRK invasion may be interpreted as being initiated by the logic of the preemptive war (first-strike advantage), and strongly conditioned by the challenge of being attacked first by the South Korea and its allies (preventive war). Both Seoul and Pyongyang were basically convinced that the other side could start a war. Kim Il Sung insisted on striking first, putting pressure on the Soviet leadership in order to convince them to support the invasion until the South attacked first. The Syngman Rhee government in the Seoul, to whom the American military government granted powers, was as belligerent and war-seeking as its counterpart in the North of the Korean peninsula. Syngman Rhee vigorously insisted on the inevitability of campaign against the North, which made U.S. very careful about providing him with offensive weapons – tanks and aircrafts.

3. **Indivisibility of a good in dispute**47

If the issue under dispute in considered indivisible, but only controlled in its entirety, bargaining may not prevent war. In other words, if both actors are not eager to reach a pre-war compromise to divide the issue in question, the fighting and decisive victory remain the only acceptable solution for both sides. In theory, both South and North Korea could have reached an agreement to remain in control each of its own territory before the Korean War. In fact, the agreement reached between them after long and costly series of battles and almost two years of negotiations left each side at the positions very similar to those they had before the outbreak of the war.

47 Fearon dismisses issue indivisibility as “empirically implausible”.
3. The truce talks and the war end

The bargaining theory assumes that negotiations over the term of an agreement to end the war are part of war/fighting. Thus, it is not unusual if the parties while talking and negotiating continue with military threats against each other. The central role of combat in the bargaining theory of war is to diminish uncertainty (the first causal explanation of war). Fighting outcomes constantly reveal information about the real balance of power and about what would be the outcome of war. The expectations of the parties in war thus tend to come closer, which opens up a room for reaching an agreement. In fact, the military component of war determines the outcome of conflict not through physical damage, but rather through changes in expectations 48.

Though many interstate wars ended with an unambiguous victory, the Korean War case was characterized by a stalemate. The negotiations to end the war began on 10 July 1951 and came to an end only two years later after the talks started, with no dramatic difference in terms of the agreement after a two-year-long impasse. What is also remarkable is that negotiations were going on concurrently with developments in the battlefield. The parties restrained from the idea of a new massive attack, but were continuously threatening each other with additional military assaults 49. The research on the termination of the Korean War by Elizabeth Stanley based on the findings of the bargaining theory has contributed to explaining domestic-level impediments to the international bargains that end war 50. Important domestic events, namely, the leadership changes in the major parties paved the way to the situation when the war could finally end.

Conclusion

The bargaining theory has made an important contribution to the study of war together with other mainstream theories of International Relations and related social science disciplines. Numerous case studies have tested and confirmed its main findings, however further empirical scholarship is necessary to test it thoroughly. The Korean War case still remains under-scrutinized and leaves much space for further theoretical and empirical analysis. For example, a study of relationship between the

49 The talks first started in Kaesong, but were moved to Panmunjom because the previous site was proclaimed unsafe as the result of attacks.
course of battles, developments and standstills of the negotiation process with a linkage to domestic politics could shed light on such focal points of the Korean War as, to name few, the decision of the USA to land in Inchon in September 1950, or the signing of the Armistice Agreement in Panmunjom on July 27, 1953 fostered by the leadership change in the Soviet Union and the United States.

References


