

Multilateral Peacekeeping During the Cold War: The United Nations Intervention in the Korean Crisis of 1950

Daisy Mbire Bennett, Ime Ufford Ibanga and Okoroafor Nwachukwu O.I
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Abstract

Five years after its founding, the United Nations authorized the first large-scale military enforcement action in its history: the 1950 intervention in Korea. This article revisits that intervention as a critical case for theorizing the relationship between collective security doctrine and great-power hegemony under bipolar constraint. Drawing on Security Council records, declassified Cold War archives, and the security studies literature on collective security, institutionalism, and peace operations, the article argues that the Korean case is best understood not as an application of the Charter's collective security model, but as a hegemonic enforcement action that borrowed the United Nations' institutional legitimacy. Its possibility rested on a contingent accident, the Soviet boycott of the Security Council over Chinese representation, rather than on the great-power unanimity the Charter's framers had assumed would underpin collective security. Engaging the realist, liberal institutionalist, and collective security literatures, and situating Korea against both the 1948 observer-mission precedent (UNTSO) and the 1956 consent-based model (UNEF I), the article shows how the operation's legal and institutional innovations, the delegated unified command and the Uniting for Peace mechanism, shaped subsequent enforcement doctrine while entrenching a durable tension between multilateral legitimation and unilateral command that persists in coalition operations today.

Keywords: *collective security; United Nations Security Council; Korean War; peace enforcement; Chapter VII; Uniting for Peace; Cold War multilateralism; hegemonic order*

1. Introduction

The Korean peninsula has long occupied a precarious position in great-power politics. From the nineteenth century onward, its survival depended either on a rough balance among neighboring empires or on deference to the relative hegemony of a single power, a pattern Hans Morgenthau traced back to Korea's historical relationship with imperial China (cited in Caner & Özev, 2019, p. 27). That pattern broke down after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, when Korea passed into thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule. Japan's 1945 surrender did not restore Korean sovereignty; it substituted one external contest for another, dividing the peninsula between American and Soviet zones of occupation at the precise historical moment when the United Nations was assuming the institutional role vacated by the failed League of Nations (Caner & Özev, 2019, p. 27). The Korean crisis of 1950 sits at the intersection of these two histories, colonial-era great-power rivalry and the nascent Cold War international order, and for that reason it has become one of the most heavily theorized episodes in the study of multilateral security institutions. Emerging barely five years after the United Nations' founding, the conflict tested the organization's Charter-based commitment to collective security under Chapter VII while simultaneously exposing the structural limitations that bipolar rivalry imposed on that

commitment. When North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950, the Security Council convened within hours and, over the following five months, issued six resolutions addressing the crisis (Brady, 2021, p. 2). Yet by the close of that period, the Council itself had been effectively displaced by the General Assembly as the UN's principal forum for the conflict, a shift explained less by any deliberate constitutional design than by the escalating structural and procedural difficulties that both shaped, and were shaped by, the fighting (Brady, 2021, p. 2).

The Korean intervention is properly understood as the United Nations' first large-scale military engagement and its inaugural experiment in collective security enforcement under Chapter VII. This distinguishes it sharply from the observer missions that preceded it, most notably the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), established in the Middle East in 1948, which relied on host-state consent, unarmed or lightly armed observers, and strict impartiality (Norberg, Mood, & Bardalai, 2024). Korea, by contrast, involved combat operations conducted without the consent of the aggressor state, under a unified command structure, and directed toward a decisive military outcome rather than the interposition of a neutral buffer. Fifty-eight states in total, forty-eight UN members, seven non-UN states, and Japan, West Germany, and South Korea, participated in some capacity as combatants, non-combatants, or providers of matériel, funding, or humanitarian assistance (Kim & Jager, 2020). The South Korean order of battle alone incorporated tens of thousands of augmentees (KATUSAs for the United States and KATCOMs for British Commonwealth formations) integrated into American, British, Australian, Canadian, French, Dutch, and Belgian units, together with the roughly 100,000-strong Korean Service Corps providing logistics and engineering support to the UN Command (Kim & Jager, 2020). This was, in substance, peace enforcement: the muscular, non-consensual counterpart to the peacekeeping doctrine that would later develop, and one that has frequently, and misleadingly, been conflated with it. This article re-examines the UN's response to the North Korean invasion as a case study in multilateralism under Cold War constraint, with particular attention to its legal foundations, its institutional innovations, and its place in the theoretical literature on collective security. The analysis foregrounds a central historical contingency: the Soviet Union's self-imposed absence from the Security Council, undertaken in protest at the exclusion of the People's Republic of China from the Chinese seat, removed the veto threat and enabled the Council to act with a decisiveness that would otherwise have been unavailable to it. Resolutions 82 and 83, adopted on 25 and 27 June 1950 respectively, called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and for member states to furnish assistance sufficient to repel the North Korean attack and restore international peace and security in the area (UN Security Council, 1950). Resolution 84, adopted on 7 July, went further, recommending a unified command under United States leadership operating beneath the UN flag. Yet as historian Melvyn Leffler's now widely cited assessment puts it, Washington "set the objectives and controlled the command," treating the conflict "as an American war conducted under a UN flag" (cited in Explaining History Podcast, 2025). From this vantage point, the United Nations functioned as a symbol of multilateral legitimacy rather than as an autonomous locus of collective decision-making. The article's central argument is that the Korean intervention achieved its immediate operational objective, repelling the North Korean invasion and restoring the pre-war territorial status quo without triggering a third world war, while simultaneously revealing the United Nations' structural dependence on hegemonic leadership in conditions of ideological deadlock. Collective security functioned in Korea not because the Charter's consensus-based mechanism operated as its framers had envisioned, but because a singular historical contingency, the Soviet boycott, temporarily suspended the great-power veto that would otherwise have paralysed the Council. This dependence constrained the operation's multilateral legitimacy in ways

that shaped the subsequent trajectory of UN peacekeeping doctrine, from the "Uniting for Peace" resolution of November 1950 to the consent-based "Blue Helmet" model inaugurated at Suez in 1956, and arguably to the coalition-of-the-willing operations of the post-Cold War and contemporary periods. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the case within three overlapping literatures, historiographical, legal, and theoretical. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework. Section 4 sets out the study's methodology and evidentiary basis. Sections 5 through 9 present the historical and institutional analysis. Section 10 discusses the case's theoretical implications, and Section 11 traces its legacy before the conclusion in Section 12.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historiography of the war's origins

Scholarship on the Korean War's origins has moved through three broad phases. The orthodox, or traditionalist, account, dominant through the 1950s and 1960s, treated the conflict as a straightforward case of Soviet-directed external aggression against a legitimate, UN-recognised government (Matray, 2002). This account was challenged from the late 1970s by Bruce Cumings's revisionist thesis, which relocated the war's origins in the unresolved civil and revolutionary conflict that had been building within Korea since the colonial period and the 1945-1948 occupation, arguing that 25 June 1950 marked an escalation of an existing internal struggle rather than its inception (Cumings, 1981, 1990, 2010). Cumings's account, though methodologically significant for its use of captured North Korean documents and Korean-language sources, has itself been contested: subsequent reviewers note that his emphasis on internal civil-war dynamics can understate the deliberateness of Kim Il-sung's external military planning and Soviet material sponsorship (Jo, 2022). A third, post-1991 phase of scholarship, drawing on declassified Soviet and Chinese archives unavailable to either the traditionalist or the revisionist generations, has partially reconciled these positions: it confirms that Kim Il-sung actively solicited Stalin's approval for a conventional cross-border invasion, that Stalin authorised and materially equipped the attack, and that Mao Zedong was informed and acquiesced, while also documenting the genuine indigenous political volatility on which Cumings had focused (Weathersby, 1995; Bok-ryong, 2004; Monger, 2014). This article adopts the reconciliatory reading: the invasion was externally planned and Soviet-sanctioned, but its plausibility to Pyongyang rested on a real, internally generated expectation of civil collapse in the South, an expectation that proved to be Kim's principal miscalculation.

2.2 Legal scholarship on Chapter VII delegation

A second body of literature examines the intervention's distinctive legal architecture. Danesh Sarooshi's (2000) landmark study of the delegation of Security Council powers identifies the Korean resolutions as the first instance in which the Council delegated its Chapter VII enforcement authority to a member state and a state-appointed commander, rather than exercising that authority directly through forces made available under Article 43 special agreements, which were never concluded. This delegation, Sarooshi (2000) argues, created a durable institutional template, an "international unified command", that reappeared, with variations, in subsequent Council-authorized, nationally led enforcement operations. Brady's (2021) critical inquiry into the Council's Korean-era practice similarly emphasises that the resolutions delegated enforcement capacity without imposing binding obligations on contributing states, a structural feature that maximised the Council's flexibility at the cost of its centralised control over the operation it had authorised. Lee's (2020) study of US-UN relations over Korean aid operations documents how this delegation

extended beyond the military sphere into financing and logistics, generating recurrent friction between Washington's assumption of operational primacy and the UN's nominal authority over relief and reconstruction.

2.3 The peacekeeping/peace-enforcement distinction

A third literature, situated within the broader study of UN peace operations, addresses the conceptual boundary between peacekeeping and peace enforcement that the Korean case helped to establish by contrast. Boutros-Ghali's (1992) *An Agenda for Peace* formalized this distinction for the post-Cold War era, defining peacekeeping as consent-based deployment for observation and confidence-building, and proposing "peace enforcement units" as a distinct, more heavily armed instrument grounded in Article 42 authority. Bellamy and Williams (2021), in the standard contemporary textbook treatment, trace the historical development of this typology across seven categories of peace operation, from preventive deployment through wider peacekeeping to peace enforcement, and identify Korea as an outlier that predates and does not fit comfortably within the consent-based model that would come to dominate UN practice after 1956. This scholarship substantiates the claim, made in the historical record itself and echoed in more recent commentary, that the Korean operation "proved to be special compared to the first peacekeeping mission" at UNTSO in 1948 (Norberg, Mood, & Bardalai, 2024; Explaining History Podcast, 2025): it was a combat operation lacking host-state consent and organised around the pursuit of decisive military victory rather than impartial interposition.

2.4 Collective security as contested theory

Finally, the case bears directly on a long-running theoretical debate over whether collective security is a coherent and workable organising principle for international order at all. Inis Claude's (1962) classical formulation treats collective security as a system in which states pledge to respond automatically and collectively to any act of aggression, regardless of its source, thereby substituting a universal deterrent for the shifting alliances of balance-of-power politics. Kupchan and Kupchan (1991) and Butfoy (1993) subsequently refined this concept, distinguishing "pure" collective security from more limited variants such as concert diplomacy among great powers. Mearsheimer's (1994/95) influential realist critique, by contrast, argues that collective security's foundational assumptions, that all states will reliably identify and oppose any aggressor regardless of their own particular interests, are empirically unsupported and that its historical track record, the League of Nations' failure and the Security Council's Cold War paralysis chief among the examples, demonstrates its impracticability under conditions of genuine great-power rivalry. The Korean case has been invoked on both sides of this debate: liberal institutionalists cite the speed and scale of the 1950 resolutions as evidence of institutional resilience (Johnson & Heiss, 2018), while realists, and a substantial body of Korean War-focused historiography, treat the operation's dependence on the Soviet boycott as proof that it was collective security in name only (Nuruzzaman, 2008; Explaining History Podcast, 2025). This article's contribution is to treat that dependence itself as the central analytical fact requiring explanation, rather than as a caveat to an otherwise successful application of Charter doctrine.

3. Theoretical Framework

Three International Relations theories illuminate the Korean intervention: Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Collective Security theory. Rather than treating these as mutually exclusive

explanations, this article follows recent scholarship in reading them as complementary lenses that each capture a distinct dimension of the case.

3.1 Realism

Realism is less a single deductive theory than what several of its own leading exponents describe as a general orientation or "attitude of mind" (Garnett, 1984, p. 110), "a loose framework" (Rosenthal, 1991, p. 7) with "room for a number of different theories" (Elman, 1996, p. 26). Its unifying premise is that the absence of a central international authority renders world politics a realm governed principally by power and interest, in which institutions are, at best, instruments through which powerful states pursue their own security. Applied to Korea, realism explains the operation's defining asymmetry: the United States supplied the overwhelming majority of non-South Korean personnel, matériel, and command authority, and retained operational control through the Unified Command under General Douglas MacArthur even as it framed its intervention as UN-mandated collective action to legitimise the broader project of communist containment (Leffler, cited in Explaining History Podcast, 2025). Realism likewise accounts for the Soviet boycott and the subsequent Chinese intervention as balance-of-power calculations rather than expressions of deference to Charter norms (Explaining History Podcast, 2025), and situates the entire episode within what international relations scholarship terms hegemonic order: multilateral cover mobilised in the service of what was, in its operational essence, a unilateral undertaking.

3.2 Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism holds that international institutions, by reducing transaction costs, generating information, and embedding reciprocal norms, can facilitate cooperation that a purely anarchic, self-help system would not otherwise produce (Johnson & Heiss, 2018). The rapidity of Resolutions 82, 83, and 84 in 1950 offers *prima facie* support for this claim: sixteen states ultimately contributed combat forces under UN authorisation, a scale of formal multilateral participation with no prior precedent (United Nations Digital Library, 1950). Yet the theory's own proponents have acknowledged its limits in precisely this domain. Mearsheimer, as cited in Nuruzzaman (2008, p. 197), argues that institutionalist logic is least persuasive in conditions of intense security competition where the risk of war is acute, precisely the conditions that obtained in 1950. The subsequent institutional history bears this out: the Soviet return to the Council in August 1950 restored the veto and necessitated the invention of an entirely new mechanism, the Uniting for Peace resolution (377A(V), November 1950), to preserve any UN role at all, a shift of authority from the Council to the General Assembly that liberal institutionalist accounts must treat as an adaptive workaround rather than as evidence of the Charter's original design functioning as intended.

3.3 Collective Security Theory

Collective security, as codified in Chapter VII, presumes that member states will act against any aggressor irrespective of their particular alliances or interests, substituting a universal commitment for the shifting coalitions of balance-of-power politics (Claude, 1962; Butfoy, 1993). The Korean case represents this doctrine's first major test and, at best, its partial vindication. Sarooshi's (2000) legal analysis, discussed above, shows that the Council's resolutions delegated enforcement authority without establishing the binding, automatic obligations that Claude's (1962) classical formulation of collective security requires; what emerged instead was a permissive framework in

which member states "furnished assistance" at their own discretion, with the United States assuming the coordinating role that a genuinely collective mechanism would have distributed. A 2020 assessment situates the war as "a testing ground for the UN" that exposed the contradiction between collective security's normative ideal and the practical realities of Cold War bipolarity (Lee, 2020). Kupchan and Kupchan (1991) further clarify what was, and was not, achieved: Korea approximated a temporary, ad hoc concert among the Western-aligned Council majority rather than the universal, alliance-blind collective security system the Charter's framers had envisioned.

3.4 Synthesis

Taken together, these three theoretical lenses converge on a hybrid characterization of the Korean intervention: realist power politics operating through, and legitimated by, liberal multilateral institutional channels, under a doctrinal banner of collective security that the operation's own structure only partially satisfied. Realism best explains the intervention's execution; liberal institutionalism best explains its rapid authorization and the institutional adaptation (Uniting for Peace) that followed the Council's subsequent paralysis; and collective security theory supplies the normative benchmark against which the operation's shortfalls, most importantly its dependence on the Soviet Union's absence rather than its assent, become analytically visible. This hybridity, rather than any single theory's full explanatory adequacy, is what makes Korea a foundational case for the study of UN-authorized enforcement, foreshadowing later debates over the 1991 Gulf War coalition, NATO's 1999 Kosovo intervention, and, more recently, the General Assembly's Uniting for Peace-based responses to Security Council paralysis over Ukraine (2022) and Gaza (2025) (Harvard International Law Journal, 2022; Istrefi, 2025).

4. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, single-case, process-tracing design, an approach well suited to establishing the sequence of decisions, contingencies, and institutional innovations through which a single historical episode produced theoretically significant outcomes. The Korean case is treated as what qualitative case-study methodology terms a "foundational" or "precedent-setting" case: its significance lies not in permitting statistical generalisation across a population of UN interventions, but in its role as the origin point for institutional and doctrinal practices, delegated unified command, Uniting for Peace, the peacekeeping/enforcement distinction, that subsequently structured the field it inaugurated. The analysis draws on three categories of source. First, primary legal and diplomatic documents: the text of Security Council Resolutions 82, 83, and 84 (1950) and General Assembly Resolutions 377A(V) and 376(V), consulted through the UN Digital Library and the UN Audiovisual Library of International Law. Second, declassified archival material released since the early 1990s from Soviet, Chinese, and US sources, which this article treats as the most reliable available evidence on the war's origins and on Stalin's and Mao's decision-making, in preference to contemporaneous but more limited Western diplomatic reporting. Third, the secondary historiographical, legal, and international-relations literature reviewed in Section 2, which is used both as a source of empirical detail and as the theoretical lens through which that detail is interpreted. Given the historical and archival nature of the inquiry, the study does not employ quantitative measures of institutional performance; its claims are interpretive and are substantiated through documentary citation and triangulation across the historiographical schools identified above.

5. Historical Background of Multilateral Peacekeeping in The Cold War Era

The First World War prompted the international community's first serious institutional investment in collective conflict prevention, the League of Nations, but secret alliances and the non-cooperation of the war's victors, most consequentially the United States' non-ratification, left the League unable to prevent a second global conflagration (Nungshengba & Singh, 2025, p. 10379). The United Nations was founded on 24 October 1945 through the signature of its Charter by 51 member states; it has since grown to 192 members (Joshi, 2021, p. 1). Its collective security architecture was rooted in the League's failed model but reinforced by the Security Council's great-power unanimity requirement, the P5 veto, intended to ensure that enforcement action would never proceed without the assent of the era's dominant military powers (Nungshengba & Singh, 2025, p. 10379). The Charter's preamble commits the organisation to saving "succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which... has brought untold sorrow to mankind" (Osmaczyk, 1990, p. 946), and the UN pursues that aim through a graduated toolkit: normative prohibition of aggression, diplomatic and judicial alternatives to armed conflict, mediation, sanctions, and, as a final resort, the dispatch of military forces either to repel aggression or to interpose between belligerents (Ahmed, 1996). The onset of the Cold War in 1947, marked by the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and Soviet consolidation across Eastern Europe, rapidly exposed the fragility of this design. Security Council sessions were routinely adjourned or vetoed by Washington or Moscow even as crises continued outside the chamber, and the unanimity requirement, intended to guarantee legitimacy, instead became the principal instrument of superpower deadlock (Explaining History Podcast, 2025). Early UN practice therefore gravitated toward observation and mediation rather than enforcement. UNTSO, established by Security Council Resolution 50 on 29 May 1948, exemplifies this cautious model: unarmed or lightly armed observers monitoring a ceasefire in Palestine with the consent of the parties involved (Norberg, Mood, & Bardalai, 2024). No precedent existed, by 1950, for large-scale enforcement action. Korea itself had been arbitrarily divided at the 38th parallel by US and Soviet occupying forces in 1945, and the resulting Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea each claimed sole legitimacy over the peninsula. The UN General Assembly recognised the ROK government in 1948 through Resolution 195(III), transforming what had originated as a local dispute over national reunification into a proxy arena for the emerging global contest (Joshi, 2021). When the Security Council convened on 25 June 1950, it determined, in Resolution 82, that the North Korean action constituted a breach of the peace, and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and withdrawal to the 38th parallel (Lee, 2020, p. 101). Resolution 83, adopted two days later, recommended that member states furnish assistance sufficient to repel the attack and restore international peace and security in the area (Park, 2004, pp. 34-35), and Resolution 84, on 7 July, established the unified command under United States leadership and authorised the use of the UN flag alongside those of participating states (Lee, 2020, p. 101). As recent scholarship emphasises, this was not "peacekeeping" in the modern, consent-based sense, but the UN's inaugural experiment in collective security enforcement, one whose success depended on the Soviet boycott rather than on any robust, consensus-driven mechanism (Explaining History Podcast, 2025).

6. The Outbreak of The Korean Crisis: Contextualizing The 1950 Invasion

On 25 June 1950, forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea launched a full-scale invasion across the 38th parallel, employing coordinated infantry, Soviet-supplied T-34 armour, and artillery, and capturing Seoul within days. South Korean forces, supported only by limited US advisory elements and lacking heavy weaponry, offered initial resistance before a chaotic retreat

(Austin, 1950; Gjeltén, 2010). Reports transmitted to the Security Council on the same day by the UN Commission on Korea described coordinated attacks along the length of the parallel, including major thrusts at Ongjin, Kaesong, and Chunchon, and seaborne landings on the east coast, framing the assault as clear interstate aggression rather than an internal uprising (Austin, 1950).

Declassified Soviet archival material establishes that Kim Il-sung had pursued Stalin's approval for a conventional invasion since at least September 1949, when Stalin initially refused, citing the risk of US intervention. Stalin reversed this position by early 1950, confirming conditional support in a telegram of 30 January 1950 and finalising details during secret consultations in Moscow that April (Monger, 2014; Explaining History Podcast, 2025). Soviet military assistance, tanks, aircraft, and training, substantially strengthened the Korean People's Army in the months preceding the attack, and Stalin's calculation appears to have combined a desire for a secure East Asian buffer with an interest in binding China more closely to the Soviet camp while avoiding direct Soviet combat exposure (Monger, 2014). A widely debated contributing factor is Secretary of State Dean Acheson's 12 January 1950 National Press Club address, which described a US "defensive perimeter" running from the Aleutians through Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines, notably omitting both Korea and Taiwan (Lindsay, 2026; Matray, 2002). Some contemporaries read this omission as an implicit invitation to invasion; however, the post-1991 archival record complicates that reading considerably. Only a single Soviet document references the speech, and Kim Il-sung initially, and erroneously, interpreted it as placing South Korea inside the perimeter (Steele, 2000). The more consequential signal of limited US commitment was the 1949 withdrawal of American combat troops from Korea and the broader trajectory of post-war demobilization (Matray, 2002). This episode illustrates precisely the reconciliatory historiographical reading developed in Section 2.1: neither Stalin nor Mao anticipated the speed or scale of the ensuing UN mobilization, and both appear to have miscalculated the risk of significant American and multilateral intervention (Weathersby, 1995). Kim assured his patrons that internal unrest in the South would facilitate rapid unification, underestimating both ROK resilience and the political will that the Soviet Council boycott would unexpectedly enable the United States to mobilize under UN auspices (Bok-ryong, 2004). The UN Temporary Commission on Korea, established in 1947 to oversee unification and elections, had already documented recurrent border incidents and the DPRK's non-cooperation; its 25 June cable to the Security Council framed the invasion as interstate aggression against the internationally recognized ROK government, supplying the factual and legal predicate on which Chapter VII action would be built (Levie, 2002).

7. The Security Council's Response: Resolutions and The Unified Command

The Soviet Union's boycott of the Security Council, sustained from January to August 1950 in protest at the PRC's exclusion from the Chinese seat, created the singular structural condition that made Council action possible (Downes, 2022). In its absence, the Council acted with a decisiveness inconsistent with its subsequent Cold War record. Resolution 82 (25 June) determined the existence of a breach of the peace and called on member states to withhold assistance from the aggressor (United Nations Digital Library, 1950). Resolution 83 (27 June) built directly on this foundation, recommending that members "furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area" (UN Security Council, 1950). Resolution 84 (7 July) went further still, recommending a unified command under explicit US authority and permitting the use of the UN flag alongside national flags (UN Security Council, 1950).

Although none of the three resolutions invokes Chapter VII by name, their substance, determining a breach of the peace and authorising collective military measures, constitutes its first operational use in a major armed conflict. Sarooshi's (2000) legal analysis identifies Resolution 84 as the Council's inaugural delegation of Chapter VII enforcement authority to a member state and its appointed commander, establishing an "international unified command" that retained nominal Council oversight while vesting operational control entirely in Washington. This delegation was as much a product of necessity as of design: the Article 43 special agreements through which the Charter's framers had intended to furnish the Council with its own standing forces were never concluded, leaving delegation to a willing and capable member state as the only available mechanism for translating a resolution into military reality (Sarooshi, 2000). The Korean resolutions therefore established a doctrinal precedent, demonstrating both the Council's capacity for swift action in a permanent member's absence and the practical reality that such action remained wholly contingent on a hegemonic power's willingness to supply the forces, logistics, and command structure the resolutions themselves did not create.

8. Multilateral Participation and The Character of Collective Security Action

Sixteen states contributed combat forces to the UN Command: The United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Turkey, Belgium, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, and Thailand (Lee, 2020). The Republic of Korea supplied the largest single ground contingent, and the non-US, non-ROK coalition provided a symbolically important multinational component operating under the UN flag. The logistical reality, however, was starkly asymmetric: the United States supplied approximately 50 percent of land forces but 86 percent of naval and 94 percent of air forces, and bore the overwhelming share of matériel, transport, and sustainment costs for allied contingents, expending over \$278 million on allied support by the war's end with only partial reimbursement (Danzik, 1994; Lee, 2020). The United Nations Command, established under Resolution 84 and still functioning today as the armistice's supervisory body, thus symbolised multilateral participation while operating under unambiguous American command (CINCUNC); smaller national contributions were frequently absorbed directly into US formations rather than operating as independent national contingents (United Nations Command, 2025). This was enforcement, not peacekeeping in any sense that would later become standard: combat operations proceeded without North Korean consent and prioritised decisive military victory over impartiality or minimal force, distinguishing the Korean case sharply from UNTSO's observation-based model (Caner & Özev, 2019).

9. Bipolar Rivalry and The Limits of UN Mechanisms

The Soviet Union's return to the Council in August 1950 immediately restored the veto and paralysed further enforcement action, prompting the United States to sponsor the Uniting for Peace resolution (377A(V)) in the General Assembly. Adopted on 3 November 1950 by a vote of 52 to 5 with two abstentions, the resolution established that where the Council, owing to a lack of permanent-member unanimity, failed to exercise its primary responsibility for international peace and security, the General Assembly could convene an emergency special session and recommend collective measures, including the use of armed force (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 377(V), 1950; Security Council Report, n.d.). General Assembly Resolution 376(V) of 7 October 1950 had already authorised UN forces to advance north of the 38th parallel, expanding the operation's mandate well beyond the restoration of the pre-war status quo (Tomuschat, 1950).

Chinese intervention in October 1950, introducing over one million People's Volunteer Army troops, dramatically escalated the war's costs and forced a UN retreat below the 38th parallel by early 1951. General MacArthur's public advocacy for extending the war into Chinese territory precipitated an acute civil-military and diplomatic crisis, culminating in his dismissal by President Truman in April 1951 (Alexander, 1986). Bipolar rivalry thus politicised every phase of the operation, transforming tactical decisions into proxy contests between the superpowers, while veto threats, the deliberate exclusion of the PRC and DPRK from Council deliberations, and the absence of any formal conciliation mechanism combined to leave the Council, when not simply bypassed, functioning in the assessment of one commentator as little more than "a debating society" (Explaining History Podcast, 2025). Disputes over aid operations and expense-sharing further strained the coalition, as US dominance in logistics and financing generated allied resentment despite formal reimbursement arrangements (Danzik, 1994).

The Uniting for Peace mechanism invented to manage this deadlock has itself become a durable feature of the international institutional landscape, invoked in eleven subsequent emergency special sessions, most recently in response to Security Council paralysis over the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the 2025 crisis in Gaza (Harvard International Law Journal, 2022; Istrefi, 2025). That a mechanism improvised to sustain a US-led enforcement action in 1950 should now function as an instrument occasionally invoked against, rather than on behalf of, a permanent member's preferences illustrates the doctrinal contingency this article emphasizes throughout: institutional innovations forged to serve one configuration of power can be redeployed, often unpredictably, once that configuration shifts.

10. Discussion: Theorizing the Korean Precedent

Reading Sections 5 through 9 through the theoretical lenses developed in Section 3 yields three interlocking conclusions. First, the intervention's authorization is best explained by liberal institutionalist logic operating under an unusual permissive condition, the Soviet absence, rather than by the routine functioning of Charter mechanisms; the institution did not overcome great-power rivalry so much as briefly escape it. Second, the intervention's execution is best explained by realism: US command authority, resource dominance, and strategic objective-setting were never meaningfully constrained by the UN's nominal oversight, and the coalition's non-US contributors were integrated into what remained, in Leffler's phrase, an American war conducted under a UN flag. Third, measured against Claude's (1962) and Butfoy's (1993) formulations of collective security as a universal, alliance-blind commitment, Korea falls markedly short: the delegated, discretionary structure that Sarooshi (2000) documents bears little resemblance to the automatic, binding response that classical collective security theory requires, and the operation is more accurately characterized as *ad hoc*, hegemonically led enforcement legitimated through collective security's institutional vocabulary.

This reading also clarifies the analytical value of contrasting Korea with UNTSO (1948) and UNEF I (1956). UNTSO's consent-based, minimal-force model reflected the Charter's Chapter VI logic and proved durable precisely because it made no claim on collective enforcement capacity. UNEF I, established after the 1956 Suez crisis, drew directly on the institutional lessons of Korea, the need for a workable command structure, for defined rules of engagement, and for a legal basis independent of Council unanimity, while deliberately eschewing Korea's enforcement character in favour of consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defence (Bellamy & Williams, 2021). Korea thus occupies a distinctive position in the peace-operations literature: neither observation mission nor consent-based peacekeeping force, but the doctrinal ancestor of

both the "coalition of the willing" enforcement model later seen in the 1991 Gulf War and the more elaborate multidimensional and Chapter VII-mandated peace operations of the post-Cold War period (Bellamy & Williams, 2021).

The case further speaks to an enduring question in security studies: whether multilateral institutional authorization meaningfully constrains hegemonic power, or merely legitimates it. The Korean evidence supports a qualified version of the latter position without collapsing into pure realist skepticism. The UN's authorization was not merely cosmetic: it secured broader international troop and financial contribution than a purely unilateral US intervention could plausibly have mobilized, and it embedded the operation within a legal and normative framework, however imperfectly realized, that shaped subsequent expectations about what UN-authorized enforcement should look like. But that authorization was, in this instance, causally downstream of an accident of Council composition rather than upstream of any binding great-power consensus, a sequencing that should give pause to institutionalist accounts that treat rapid Council authorization as self-evidently the product of a well-functioning collective security architecture. In this sense, Korea offers an early illustration of a pattern that recurs across later cases of Council-authorized, hegemonically-led enforcement: legitimacy and control travel together only when a dominant power's preferences and the Council's authorization happen, often contingently, to align.

11. Outcomes and Legacy for Peacekeeping Doctrine

The armistice signed at Panmunjom on 27 July 1953 established the Demilitarized Zone as a four-kilometre buffer along the Military Demarcation Line, but produced no formal peace treaty; hostilities simply ceased. Casualty estimates across both Koreas, China, and the UN coalition exceed four million (St. Croix, 2024). The intervention achieved its immediate objective: it repelled the initial invasion, preserved ROK sovereignty, and avoided direct superpower confrontation, thereby validating a limited, contingent form of collective security under Cold War constraint. It also, however, entrenched the US-ROK alliance, militarized the peninsula's division indefinitely, and left the underlying political dispute unresolved; the UNC continues to supervise the armistice as of 2025 (Young, 2024; United Nations Command, 2025).

The intervention's institutional legacy is nonetheless substantial. It pioneered the delegated unified command model that Sarooshi (2000) identifies as a recurring feature of subsequent enforcement operations; it produced the Uniting for Peace mechanism that remains available, and periodically invoked, whenever Council paralysis threatens to leave a crisis unaddressed; and it supplied the negative lesson, articulated most directly in Boutros-Ghali's (1992) Agenda for Peace and formalized in Bellamy and Williams's (2021) typology, that consent-based peacekeeping and non-consensual enforcement are analytically and operationally distinct undertakings that should not be conflated within a single doctrinal category. UNEF I, deployed at Suez in 1956 under Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and General Assembly authority, directly incorporated these lessons, adopting consent, impartiality, and the non-use of force except in self-defense as its organizing principles precisely because Korea had demonstrated what an enforcement operation, lacking those features, entailed. Post-Cold War practice has continued to draw on both models, often within a single operation, reflecting the durable tension between Chapter VI consent-based practice and Chapter VII enforcement authority that Korea was the first case to expose.

12. Conclusion

The 1950 UN intervention in Korea exemplifies both the promise and the peril of Cold War multilateralism. Enabled by the Soviet boycott, the Security Council swiftly invoked Chapter VII

authority through Resolutions 82, 83, and 84, authorising the first large-scale collective security action conducted under the UN flag, with sixteen states contributing combat forces to the United Nations Command in what remains a foundational operationalisation of the Charter's enforcement provisions. Yet US hegemony, evident in the overwhelming preponderance of forces, logistics, and command authority vested in CINUNC, combined with the bipolar deadlock that followed the Soviet Council return and Chinese intervention, fundamentally limited the operation's authenticity as collective, rather than hegemonically delegated, security, distinguishing it sharply from the consent-based, impartial peacekeeping model inaugurated at Suez six years later. Theoretically, the case illuminates realist hegemonic leadership, liberal institutionalist resilience through the Uniting for Peace innovation, and the partial, contingent testing of collective security doctrine, establishing precedents, unified command, delegated enforcement, General Assembly emergency action, that shaped the subsequent evolution of UN peacekeeping while underscoring the organization's abiding dependence on great-power configuration. The Korean experience arguably foreclosed the repetition of comparable large-scale enforcement action for the remainder of the Cold War, yet its institutional legacy, the Uniting for Peace mechanism most visibly, continues to offer instructive lessons for balancing power politics against institutional norms amid the renewed multipolarity of the present period. Future research might usefully extend the process-tracing approach adopted here to a systematic comparison of Korea with the 1991 Gulf War coalition and post-2011 Council-authorized enforcement operations, in order to assess more precisely which institutional features of hegemonically-led, UN-authorized enforcement have proven durable and which have been contingent upon the particular great-power configuration of 1950.

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