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## ORAL HISTORY

# *Resolving the Korean Crisis*

Eric Gonsalves

*Ambassador Eric Gonsalves, former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, narrates the ringside view of India's role in resolving the Korean crisis of 1950–54 as India's first successful global assignment.*

**Indian Foreign Affairs Journal (IFAJ):** Thank you Ambassador for agreeing to talk to the Journal on the Indian role, for the first time at the international level, related to the crisis which had developed in Korea.

**Eric Gonsalves (EG):** This was the first Cold War conflict in Asia. India took an active role in the Security Council debate on the Korean question. The two sides, i.e. the Western alliance led by the USA under a UN resolution, called the UN Command, and a Socialist alliance of North Korea and China (known as the Korean People's Army (KPA) and the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV)) supported by the Soviet Union had finally reached a military stalemate and had agreed on the terms of a ceasefire by mid-1953. However, a major problem on which they were unable to reach agreement was how to deal with a large number of Korean and Chinese prisoners, about two hundred thousand of them, held by the UN Command. These prisoners refused to return to their original countries. There were also a few similar UN prisoners, mostly Americans, held by the Korean-Chinese Command who also refused to go home. The solution, sought was in handing over these prisoners to a neutral group headed by India for final disposal.

The arrangement provided that the original command of the prisoners would be allowed access to "explain" the correct position to them before they finally decided where they would like to go. An Indian custodian force was to take over physical custody of these prisoners. The Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) consisting of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland and chaired by India was to arrange for these explanations. The process was not very successful, and eventually we had to dissolve that Commission. But without going through it, the Korean truce could never have been implemented. This was to be India's initiation into peacemaking and conflict resolution.

**IFAJ:** What prompted India to come forward and play this kind of role? Or did we do it on our own entirely?

**EG**: This was in line with the whole trend of Nehruvian diplomacy. Even before independence he had made India take a very active role in crisis situations and trying to help solve them. One can recall the Asian Relations Conference, and the successful Indian efforts to help Indonesia gain independence. The policy of helping independence movements to obtain freedom from the colonial powers continued till the end of apartheid in South Africa.

The major world problem in the early 1950s was the eruption of the Cold War. There was practically no communication between the two sides in those days. There was great need of an interlocutor and for somebody to hold the ring to ensure that there was a certain amount of confidence and faith in the dealings between the two sides. India was unique in taking on this role at this point in history. Naturally India took an active role when the subject was being debated in the UN Security Council. Her Chairmanship of the Commission became almost inevitable that no other country could be accepted as impartial by the two sides.

**IFAJ:** But what were the main issues involved in and how did we really try to tease them out and resolve them one by one?

**EG:** The specific issue was a very concrete and simple one. A large number of Prisoners of War (POWs) held by the two sides, mainly by the United Nations Command, were refusing to go back to their respective countries, Korea and China, because they felt that they would have a better life remaining with their captors. The Chinese and North Korean governments felt that this was a slur on them, which they did not want to concede. They insisted that they must be returned before the truce was concluded. So the agreement in essence was that these POWs would be handed over by the UN on the southern side and the Northern Command (they were about a thousand) on the northern side. At one stage there were about two hundred thousand on the southern side. Sygnman Rhee (the then South Korean President) unilaterally released all the Koreans; so about 75,000 (mainly Chinese) were left over. All these were to be handed over to the NNRC with the mandate that we would ensure the conduct of explanations to convince them, if possible, that they should return home.

**IFAJ:** So how did we manage this?

**EG:** Neither the Government of India nor the Indian Army had ever faced this kind of a situation. This was our first peacemaking operation and we really learnt on the job. First we took over physical control of the POWs. Then we worked out a procedure for arranging the explanations as outlined above. Given the number of governments, authorities and languages involved, it turned out to be a very complex process.

**IFAJ:** Does "various governments" mean the Chinese government?

**EG:** Basically with two governments in the north, but it was a single command constituting the Korean People's Army (KPA) and the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV). We dealt in fact substantively with the Chinese and partly with the Koreans. On the southern side, we dealt with the United Nations Command, which was commanded by an American General comprising troops from the USA and her allies– Australian, British, Thai, Turkish, etc. It was on the same pattern that NATO, SEATO, etc were later established.

The Repatriation Commission itself consisted of four countries, two of which have been chosen by the KPA-CPV side, namely Czechoslovakia and Poland and the other two by the United Nations Command, namely Switzerland and Sweden. Both sides chose India as the Chairman.

**IFAJ:** Who Chaired the Commission?

**EG:** The Chairman of the Commission was General Thimayya and the Alternate Chairman was Ambassador B.N. Chakravarty. There were the usual staff and a number of foreign civil and defence service officers to handle the explanations.

There was a brigade of Indian troops, which provided the custodian force under the command of General Thorat who actually held the POWs and controlled the POW camps.

**IFAJ:** Where were these POWs kept?

**EG:** They were kept in camps in the Demarcation Zone (DMZ) which had been established by the cease-fire agreement, and which exists till this day. The NNRC like the other Truce Commissions was actually located on the demarcation line – between the two Koreas. The Chinese and the Koreans built half of our camp to the north of the Demarcation Line and the Americans built the other half to the south. The Indians lived on both sides of the line. The Swiss

and the Swedes were on our southern side and the Czechs and Poles on the northern side.

**IFAJ:** How long did this process take … actually repatriating them to the last man?

**EG:** Well, we were there for only six months. We succeeded in repatriating a very small number of prisoners. It was an education to us to discover the effectiveness of psychological warfare. The POW camps had been very well organised while they were under UN control. The South Koreans and Taiwanese with the help of the Americans had already brainwashed a sufficient number of prisoners. They had formed groups who were to make quite sure that anybody who even considered repatriation was threatened into compliance. In some cases those who held out were killed inside the camps. The Custodian Force India (CFI) had great difficulty even maintaining a degree of control inside, and was only deployed on the outer perimeters of the camps. We were not very sure what actually went on inside the camps because we didn't have the manpower for total physical control. Later it was discovered that they were well supplied with weapons and communications equipment hidden in the supplies coming from the UN command. Radios and weapons were smuggled in with the rations. This was before the days of metal detectors, etc. We only discovered the modus operandi when it was too late. We were both naïve and innocent. One or two cases of intimidation were witnessed by our troops. But it would have required far more manpower and force than we had at our disposal to effectively change the situation.

**IFAJ:** What was the problem? Was the clash between the Chinese and the North Koreans? What kind of problem was it?

**EG:** No, the Chinese and the Koreans were kept separate. We didn't have many Koreans at that time. I think only about 5000 or so. The reality was that all the prisoners were controlled by fear of the group leaders and if anyone tried to get away or defect, they were threatened and if they persisted, they were killed. Later I discovered that this is not uncommon in many prison systems around the world. In fairness, I suspect that persuasion was not too hard as many of the prisoners had joined up as teenagers. The conditions in North Korea after the

war were very hard and the conditions in China as compared to Taiwan were also quite unattractive.

**IFAJ:** Then why could we not succeed? What actually happened? Out of 75,000 how many do you think we could send back? Why did we not do it for all?

**EG:** We were supposed to be holding the ring and make it possible for their original commanders and senior officers to come and explain the reality on the ground at home to the POWs. The final decision whether to go back or not had to be the prisoners' own choice.

**IFAJ:** Does that mean the Commission was not mandated to send them back?

**EG:** No. The Commission was only mandated to facilitate that their original government had reasonable access to make their case to their prisoners. But in fact, even the few explanations that took place were usually turned into a farce because the POWs were very highly motivated. They invariably argued back and often tried to assault the explanation team. On many occasions, the Indian guards had to intervene and stop it. It rapidly became very clear to us that we could devise no procedure to fulfil our mandate. So on 1 February 1954, the Commission decided to dissolve itself, open the gates and let the POWs go free.

**IFAJ:** So, where did they go?

**EG:** Almost all returned to South Korea. The majority of the Chinese must have eventually reached Taiwan. We had a similar problem in the north but it was much more peaceful and finally a thousand of them, mostly Americans, went to America. A few others who were Communist sympathisers went to China. I seem to remember that there were five or six Koreans who didn't want to go anywhere. According to the Geneva Convention, the only thing we could do was to bring them to India. They remained in India for many years. Eventually I think one or two died here and one or two went home.

**IFAJ:** They were kept in India as what … technically … refugees from Korea?

**EG:** There were so many displaced people in India at any time. They were found jobs by the rehabilitation authorities. I met one of them years later, and he was doing fine. As I recollect he was making shoes.

**IFAJ:** Were the Chinese and North Koreans unhappy with the role we played there because they could not get most of their people back?

**EG:** No, I think the Chinese were aware that this was a process that had to be gone through. They were aware that the UN command had mala fide intentions.

But they were worldly wise enough to know that by the time we had taken over, the prisoners had been so brainwashed that there was no question of the vast majority going back. But they needed a face saving device to show that efforts had been made, and they had not given in on this point. They could say that the Commission made the final decision. I didn't get the impression that the Chinese were too unhappy although they called the decision unfortunate. They invited a whole lot of our senior advisors to visit Beijing and were not only generous with their hospitality, but also arranged meetings with very senior officials.

**IFAJ:** But what was your reading? Were they really brainwashed? Then, by whom … by South Koreans, by the US, or by somebody else …?

**EG:** As I said, these were the young kids who had been recruited or conscripted as CPV some years earlier. Brainwashing them into believing that they would get a better life somewhere else should have been a very easy task. My own suspicion is, though I have no evidence, the people who came mainly from Taiwan did it but the psychological warfare experts say they were the Americans.

**IFAJ:** But they had their parents to return to, they had their relations to go back to … .

**EG:** No. These points came up during some of the explanations, because the people coming from the Chinese government, in one or two cases, were able to say that you are so and so from so and so country, your sister and parents are waiting and so on. I recall one such case happening when I was presiding during an explanation session. The POW got up and called them liars, thieves and murderers, tried to assault them physically and said, "if I get the chance, I will liquidate all of you". Virtually no communication took place between the explainers and the POW.

**IFAJ:** So, the Chinese were not particularly unhappy with India as it is, in this course.

**EG:** No. Soon after we left Korea, the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai Treaty was concluded in 1954. Most likely the negotiations were going on during that time.

The important thing to bear in mind is that the PRC government was very confident after ousting the KMT from China. They had the backing of the Soviet Union, and a very effective ally in Kim Il-Sung who had proved himself an outstanding and charismatic leader in Korea. They had pushed back the Americans led by the legendary MacArthur who had literally conquered Japan.

Yet while they had great confidence in their destiny and their ideology, they were still isolated in a Western-oriented Asia. So they also realised the advantages of Nehru sponsoring them for recognition in Asia and the world. It is said that Chou En-lai resented Nehru's patronising manner at Bandung. I doubt this. Some years later after 1962, when I was in Myanmar, he would make it a point at receptions to seek out the senior Indian diplomat (often myself) and convey his greetings. While interests coincide, things work out; when they diverge, it is useless to recall earlier relations of trust and confidence. But equally, divergences can also revert to convergence. So we must go by current realities and not sentiments.

**IFAJ:** Was there any appreciation of our role by the UN, by the so-called international community, or by anybody else?

**EG:** After Korea, I was posted in New York. The Americans at that point of time were going through one of the worst phases of their national life. That was the peak of the anti-communist phase led by Senator McCarthy. A major national debate was centred on "who lost China". I would say that there were more regrets in sections of the American establishment about India's friendship with "Commies", rather than the other way around. The UN was merely a cover for American action as they had succeeded in getting the resolution to intervene in Korea passed while the Soviet Union was boycotting the Security Council, a mistake they never repeated. The UN itself was kept out of all Cold War disputes thereafter. However, I believe the report of the NNRC, which I signed as its Secretary, is in the UN archives.

The "international community" as a concept did not exist. Those were the days of the free world and the socialist world.

**IFAJ:** In this kind of role, we would recall that almost around the same time, we were also sucked into Indo-China. Are there any parallels or comparisons that we can draw between these two roles?

**EG:** This was a major topic when I came back from Korea to Delhi on my way to New York. In the Indo-China negotiations in Geneva we were much more visible. The Commissions were made up in the same way, a nominee each of the US and the USSR with India in the chair. I did report that what we were undertaking was a thankless task. In these peacekeeping roles you are not often in a position to affect the outcome because the two sides are much more powerful than you are. They will use that power whenever it suits them. You may be a temporary buffer to help keep the peace. But when things go wrong,

you have very limited leverage. You can appeal to the governments who appointed you or to public opinion. The former are very often the problem and they have a greater ability to influence the media. So it can become very frustrating. However in retrospect, I do believe that the roles we have played have been beneficial and have given conflict resolution and the restoration of peace a better chance in many cases. Of course, since we do not serve anyone's interest, few would thank us. But we should not be deterred if we feel there is some worthwhile result possible, even when it does not satisfy our own initial expectations. There is, however, a need to recognise when you have become redundant and then you should look for an exit strategy. In Indo-China, we did not do that. In Korea, we did. The Indo-China Commission dragged on for years. The contributors became less and less reliable. Diplomatic relations with several countries including Canada, a co-member, were strained. Few people in India cared. But after Korea people thought a good job had been done. When the Custodian Force returned, I don't remember exactly where they docked, I think it was Calcutta or Madras; there was a rousing reception. In Indo-China only one Commission was properly wound up, in Cambodia. The other Commissions just collapsed. What I want to say is that neither was there a feeling of satisfaction in India that we did something worthwhile in Indo-China, which in fact in the early days we did, nor was there any recognition in the world outside with the possible exception of the Vietnamese government.

**IFAJ:** But both in Laos and Cambodia there is a lot of goodwill for us out of that Commission … but that apart… Coming to the Korean Commission, in retrospect, do you think that the kind of role which we should have played or we should not have played or we could do it better or anything as a reflection of the kind of role, which India played at that time?

**EG:** In retrospect, there are always things, which you realise you could have done better in terms of methodology, procedure, etc. Today there are academics, professors and generals who specialise in peacekeeping and conflict resolution. We were the pioneers, and we started a process. But I don't think that in terms of policy, we could have done anything different. At that time the non-aligned movement was still to come into existence, but it was important to establish the concept that you could have powers that are outside the two major blocs who could help to mediate the differences between those two blocs to reduce tensions and find solutions. This was more than the traditional role of a "neutral" that Switzerland had done for a very long time in Europe.

I would certainly say that the Korean exercise was definitely a feather in our cap and established us in the role of peacemaker for many years. Sadly, it is not very well remembered as it happened long ago and India has no great sense of history. Nehru's legacy is out of fashion. Non-alignment is no longer a valid ideology. Nevertheless the international system will always need mediators and peacekeepers. We need to update and modernise from the lessons of past legacies like Korea, Indo-China, and more recent assignments in Africa and West Asia for dealing with future problems. I would even go further and suggest that unilateral exercises we have undertaken in South Asia such as Bangladesh, the 1971 help (JV & Insurgency) and the 1987–90, the IPKF operation in Sri Lanka and the 1986 exercise in the Maldives were also valuable peacemaking operations which contributed greatly to restoring peace and stability, whatever criticism they may have attracted. They could never have been mounted under UN auspices because of the political context and the time and resource constraints.

**IFAJ:** How big was our contingent there?

**EG:** The NNRC itself consisted of about 50 Indian officers drawn from the foreign defence and civil services. So it was a fairly small outfit. The Custodian Force (India), which took over the POWs and their camps, was made up of a full military brigade, may be 2000 officers and men.

**IFAJ:** Can you throw light on the strong points and the weaknesses of the way we functioned under this Commission which would illustrate for the future or any other information that you would like to share with us?

**EG:** This was a fairly short exercise in time and its mandate was also limited. I don't think this particular situation would arise again. This was during the early days of the Cold War. The communication channels, which developed later between the two sides of the Cold War, did not exist then. The Korean conflict was very bitter and hard fought. Even after it had ended, the two sides made it clear that their original aim of uniting the country under their regime had not been given up. And this remained part of a global policy of the two alliances for some decades. But the Korean Armistice has held since 1953.

I don't think this kind of conflict will happen today. There are still efforts to dominate, but today the principal method is regime change, and even that is not often sought through outright conquest. Major problems are mostly intra-state rather than inter-state, and more players are non-state groups with an agenda, which they want to implement using violent methods. Today there is a plethora

of peacemakers and interlocutors. In fact, the great powers themselves are interested in becoming the interlocutors. Look at the Middle East and analyse the American role. They are an interested party actively intervening militarily and politically in the region's affairs. But peacemaking in Lebanon and Palestine and probably elsewhere can only progress with their active participation. If and when the world makes progress to a more effective UN and multipolar system it might be possible to consider more effective and constructive efforts for peacemaking and keeping.

**IFAJ:** But the Americans are not able to solve it. They might ask India to play some role, to help get themselves out of such a situation, may be in Iraq, perhaps in Afghanistan. We have done this kind of job in East Timor, incidentally under the UN again.

**EG:** Yes, I have no doubt there will be demands and requests. Korea was the entry point. We gained a reputation there and since then we have taken part in many assignments. Today the Defence Ministry has a Directorate, which specialises in this. And we have gained a reputation, and so have other South Asian countries. One has to differentiate between peacemaking and peacekeeping. Outsiders very rarely do peacemaking. The combatants and their mentors once they find that military force has reached its limits, then they may seek help in brokering a truce. We did that in Indo-China. We did it again in Lebanon supporting Hammarskjold's strategy. Later we also took on the peacekeeping role. Subsequently, we tried to do the same in the Congo. There the Americans thwarted us. One should bear in mind that in Lebanon and in Congo we went acting on the request of the one and only UN Secretary General who was willing to stick his neck out and actually to do something to achieve peace. Hammarskjöld was unique, and he could have brought about a difference in Congo if he had not died. This was again a very special set of circumstances. I cannot see it being repeated again now.

For facilitating settlements in a conflict situation, we need to improve the UN process greatly as that is too slow, cumbersome and devoid of ready resources. Firefighting cannot be done like that. When we went to Sri Lanka in 1971 the Sri Lankan government was almost overthrown. (I was in fact in charge of the Sri Lankan affairs at that time.) The Government of India was almost entirely focused on Bangladesh. But we went into Sri Lanka with a brigade of troops, and a few ships at a few days notice. We restored Mrs. Bandaranayke's elected

government to power. And we have done the same thing in Maldives on a later occasion in 1988–89. But the lesson from all of these is that you have a moment of opportunity and you have to take it. You must also leave as early as possible, and do not expect gratitude. An exit strategy is a must.

Timor was fine because it was a very small operation. But larger operations are hardly feasible. Take Bangladesh. Looking back, I don't know how many more thousands of Bangladeshis would have perished in 1971 if we had not gone in when we did. An international operation would have required months to prepare, no one would have been willing to commit that quantum of resources and the political will would never have been found.

**IFAJ:** Did this issue ever generate any domestic debate or was the issue ever discussed in the legislature?

**EG:** The Korean POW issue happened 55 years ago and that was a different time altogether. We didn't have the fractious polity that exists today. Indian foreign policy was national and was supported right across the spectrum. It wasn't a divisive issue. I think the first man to congratulate Panditji was Hiren Mukherji who was the leader of the Communist Party and, if I am not mistaken, the Leader of the Opposition. As I believe I said earlier there were demonstrations in support of our troops when they returned.

**IFAJ:** At one stage you said that the UN systems were not helpful in such activities. Is it because of the political composition of the Security Council or due to the structural constraints within the UN decision-making?

**EG:** UN peacekeeping or peacemaking is defective because you have to get a consensus in the Security Council. With the veto, this is difficult and often impossible. Hence no Cold War-related issue ever went to the Security Council. Korea was the exception. Even with a Security Council decision you need agreement on financing the particular operation, convince governments to provide forces and agree on the command structure etc. All these present enormous difficulties. Normally a peacekeeping operation of even moderate size cannot be arranged in less than about three to six months. In a crisis situation this is meaningless. You should have a standing force, which can move immediately and deal with the problem. The major powers have always opposed the creation of such capacity, as it would undermine their pre-eminence. If we had waited for the UN to do something even in a very small problem like the Maldives they would have been too late. In 1971, Sri Lanka contacted the

Western powers at the same time as India. So did the Maldives President in his crisis. They were told to go to India. We have the resources, men, planes and ships. A government can react much faster than the UN. And in a crisis time can be vital. For the future, the Japanese and we are now discussing the possibility of earmarking resources by prior arrangement. Essentially, you have to be prepared and willing. Who was there first when the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, in spite of our own disasters at home? It is really a question of political will and it can pay dividends.

If you want this from the UN, you must earmark forces, obtain agreement on standardised terms of engagement within which they operate, you need a preordained command structure. You can't have Americans saying that we will only operate under American command, the British saying we will operate only under American or British generals or the Europeans saying the home government will decide their role. That is why Asian, and especially South Asian forces, are so popular with the UN. They don't mind doing the dirty work.

IFAJ: One important question. As you know, the UN is considering taking more of an interventionist role under the responsibility to protect or whatever else it is called, in which thoughtful use of force is being envisaged under the UN command. So if it is not even capable of handling these relatively smaller matters, use of force is far more complicated.

**EG:** Interventions can be sanctioned under either Chapter 6 or 7. I may be wrong, but I think almost every operation in which we were involved has been under Chapter 6 except Congo. Use of force is only mandated under Chapter 7. And sanctions under Chapter 7 don't necessarily envisage the use of force. The debates over Iran's nuclear projects and earlier UN debacles in Rwanda and the Balkans indicate that there is almost no willingness in the international community for the use of force by UN troops. Almost all American unilateral military action have been sought to be covered by stretching Article 51, i.e. self-defence to absurd limits. My own judgment is that the UN has not acquired the capacity or the will to use force in any significant way. This is why the current US phraseology is to say that they are carrying out the will of the international community by using a coalition of the willing. In a broader political sense, the UN must operate in a more democratic way, moving away from unipolarity and even multipolarity with great power domination which the veto ensures.

**IFAJ:** Thank you Ambassador for sharing your firsthand experience on India's involvement in the crisis and evaluating global peacekeeping missions with a larger perspective. This will be a useful document for those interested in the issue.

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