

## India's role in ending the Korean war

“One of the follow-up actions to the Armistice Agreement was the establishment of a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) which was to decide on the fate of over 20,000 prisoners of war from both sides.” (From left): P.N. Haksar and Lt. General K.S. Thimayya with members of the NNRC in Panmunjom in 1953. | Photo Credit: [Zeuschel Omniscan 11](#)

Dramatic events that were inconceivable a few months back are now [unfolding rapidly in the Korean peninsula](#). The Korean war of the early 1950s had never formally ended and an uneasy truce has prevailed for well over half a century. What established the truce was the Korean Armistice Agreement, which was signed on July 27, 1953.

### Executing the peace campaign

Numerous books have been written about the Korean war which directly involved the Soviet Union, the U.S. and China. But in none of these works have the indefatigable efforts of India to restore peace in that region been discussed. The first scholar to do so was a British historian, Robert Barnes, who accessed different archives and wrote a meticulously researched paper called ‘Between the Blocs: India, the United Nations, and Ending the Korean War’, which was published in *The Journal of Korean Studies* five years back. This is an academic journal with a limited circulation and therefore Mr. Barnes’s article never got the wider attention it deserves.

Mr. Barnes contends that India played a “much-overlooked but significant role” in bringing the Korean conflict to an end. Naturally, his main focus is on Jawaharlal Nehru, for whom this was a high point. But Mr. Barnes also highlights the role of others who helped Nehru craft and execute the peace campaign. Initially, India’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, B.N. Rau, was very active. India’s Ambassador in China, K.M. Panikkar, was the channel through which Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai communicated his views on the Korean conflict to the Americans as well as to the UN, since the People’s Republic of China was not a member of that body then. But the pivot of India’s efforts at New York from mid-1952 onwards, for over a year, was V.K. Krishna Menon, who was sent as Nehru’s special envoy. It is well known that the Americans hated Menon; what is less known is that he was quite an anathema to the Soviets as well. But finally on December 3, 1952, the Indian resolution was adopted at the UN with unanimous non-Soviet support.

Both Nehru and Menon realised that this was only a partial victory and more needed to be done to bring the Soviets and the Chinese on board. Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953, was a crucial turning point. Thereafter, signals from the communist camp were that a quick end to the hostilities would not be unwelcome. Menon submitted another proposal, which, however, was not acceptable to the Americans who came up with their own version. But they agreed to merge their resolution with Menon’s to move things forward. This was then to lead to the Armistice Agreement.

### Follow-up action

One of the follow-up actions to the Armistice Agreement was the establishment of a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) which was to decide on the fate of over 20,000 prisoners of war from both sides. India was chosen as the Chair of the NNRC, with Poland and Czechoslovakia representing the Communist bloc and Sweden and Switzerland representing the Western world. There was to be a UN Command led by an Englishman and a Custodian Force sent by India. Nehru selected Lt. General K.S. Thimayya as the Chairman of the NNRC and Major General S.S.P. Thorat as the Commander of the Custodian Force India, as it was called. P.N. Haksar, then Krishna Menon’s aide in the High Commission in London, was appointed as one of

the two political advisers in Thimayya's team. Very soon he became the only one, since the other, I.J. Bahadur Singh, had to be repatriated from Korea quickly on health grounds.

Thimayya became a hero at the end of the NNRC's tenure in February 1954. He was feted both at home and abroad for having executed a most thankless task courageously, although he and Haksar had developed serious differences. Haksar felt that Thimayya was far too concerned with American opinion while Thimayya thought Haksar was too solicitous of the communists. The Commission's reports were drafted entirely by Haksar and submitted to the UN General Assembly, one in December 1953 and another in February 1954. The Swedes and the Swiss wrote their dissent to certain paragraphs in both reports, showing how intensely polarised the NNRC was. At the end of its work, the NNRC was left with over 80 prisoners of war who resisted being handed over and expressed a desire to go to neutral countries. On humanitarian considerations, Nehru decided to bring them to India pending a final decision by the UN on where they would go. Most left immediately for other countries in Central and South America. But a few stayed back and got loans to start poultry businesses. Only one of them, Kim Hyeong, now survives. His son too lived in India for over 30 years before taking his ailing father back for good to South Korea.

Incidentally, four years before his death, Haksar was reminded of his role in Korea by one Colonel Bhupinder Singh, to whom he wrote on March 24, 1994: "I must confess that I am intrigued by your invitation to me to join the members of the Indo-Korean War Veterans in welcoming the new Ambassador from South Korea... It is of course true that I spent some few months of my life in Panmunjom in my capacity as Alternate Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission of which General Thimayya was the Chairman and General Thorat was the Commander of the Custodian Forces of India. Our task [was] to ascertain the wishes of the several thousands of prisoners of war which the UN Command had handed over to us. A small number of Korean prisoners opted to come to India. I had the privilege of preparing the report on the entire operation which was submitted to the UN. Be that as it may, I find it awkward to be classified as a Korean War Veteran."

*Jairam Ramesh, a former Union minister, is a Member of Parliament belonging to the Congress. This article is derived from his forthcoming book, 'Intertwined Lives: P.N. Haksar & Indira Gandhi'*

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