

Sweden's Peacekeeping Contributions through the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission

Gabriel Jonsson
Stockholm University

Abstract

This paper investigates what role Sweden, by participating in the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) since 1953, has played to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula. What specific contributions has the NNSC done? How important are they in comparison to other factors that have preserved peace? These issues are analyzed by comparing the tasks of the NNSC, as defined by the Armistice Agreement, and the Commission's work. Consideration is also given to the Commission's composition and whether its role has changed throughout the years or not. North Korea's policy to dismantle the NNSC in the 1990s is included, as are the Commission's responses and the subsequent reorganization of its work.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, North Korea, Poland, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, United States, United Nations, United Nations Command, Military Armistice Commission, Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission

Introduction

How has peace been maintained on the Korean peninsula since the Korean War ended in 1953? In order to analyze this question, this study focuses on the role of Sweden as a member of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Committee (NNSC) to preserve peace. What are the specific contributions of the NNSC? What is their significance in comparison to other factors that have preserved peace? The starting point to answer these issues will be to identify the Commission's tasks as stated in the Armistice Agreement. Then how it has actually implemented the tasks is investigated. Consideration is taken to the composition of the NNSC and whether its role has changed or not throughout the decades. North Korea's policy to dismantle the NNSC in the 1990s is included, as are the Commission's responses and the subsequent reorganization of its work, including the expanded tasks the NNSC were given in 2005.

Three theoretical frameworks are applied. First, peace refers to peace researcher Johan Galtung's concept "negative peace" meaning "absence/reduction of violence of all kinds." Second, scholars I. William Zartman and Maureen R. Berman present the "game theory" arguing that a "zero-sum" situation, referring to the view that what one side gains the other side loses, characterizes a conflict before negotiation starts. Negotiations aim to change that view and the points of dispute into something that both parties can benefit from. Trust and credibility are important in this context, but also good personal working relationships can have a positive impact. They write: "Contacts away from the bargaining table in a relaxed atmosphere may contribute to the creation of good working relations." Third, scholar Christopher S. Mitchell argues that any third-party planning to intervene in a protracted regional conflict has to base a conflict reduction strategy on creating or enhancing "positive" symmetries. The expression refers to equalities in the conflict that reduce and settle rather than enhance or escalate it.¹

The mandate of the NNSC

The Armistice Agreement established the NNSC "... to carry out the functions of supervision, observation, inspection, and investigation, as stipulated in Sub-paragraphs 13(c) and 13(d) and Paragraph 28 hereof, and to report the results of such supervision, observation, inspection, and investigation to the Military Armistice Commission." The Military Armistice Commission (MAC) was set up "...to supervise the implementation of this Armistice Agreement and to settle through negotiations any violations of this Armistice Agreement." The NNSC shall also:

Conduct, through its members and its Neutral Nations Inspection teams, the supervision and inspection provided for in Sub-paragraphs 13(c) and 13(d) of this Armistice Agreement at the ports of entry enumerated in Paragraph 43 hereof, and the special observations and inspections provided for in Paragraph 28 hereof at those places where violations of this Armistice Agreement have been reported to have occurred. The inspection of combat aircraft, armored vehicles, weapons, and ammunition by the Neutral Nations Inspection Teams shall be such as to enable them to properly insure that reinforcing combat

aircraft, armored vehicles, weapons, and ammunition are not being introduced into Korea; but this shall not be construed as authorizing inspections or examinations of any secret designs or characteristics of any combat aircraft, armored vehicle, weapon, or ammunition.

Paragraph 13(c) prohibits "...the introduction into Korea of reinforcing military personnel...". But "...replacements of units or personnel by other units or personnel who are commencing a tour of duty in Korea..." are permitted at five ports of entry in the North and five in the South. The NNSC inspection teams "... shall be accorded full convenience of movement within the areas and over the routes of communication set forth on the attached map (Map 5)."

Paragraph 13(d) prohibits:

... the introduction into Korea of reinforcing combat aircraft, armored vehicles, weapons, and ammunition; provided however, that combat aircraft, armored vehicles, weapons, and ammunition which are destroyed, damaged, worn out, or used up during the period of the armistice may be replaced on the basis piece-for-piece of the same effectiveness and the same type.

In order to justify such replacements, "... reports concerning every incoming shipment of these items shall be made to the MAC and the NNSC; such reports shall include statements regarding the disposition of the items being replaced." The NNSC shall through its Inspection Teams "conduct supervision and inspection of the replacement of combat aircraft, armored vehicles, weapons, and ammunition authorized above, at the ports of entry enumerated in Paragraph 43 hereof."

The Commission shall have four senior officers, two to be appointed by neutral nations nominated by the United Nations Command (UNC), that is, Sweden and Switzerland, and two by the neutral nations nominated jointly by the Korean People's Army (KPA)/Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV), that is, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The term "neutral nations" refers to "...those nations whose combatant forces have not participated in the hostilities in Korea". To implement its tasks, the NNSC shall be "...provided with, and assisted by, twenty (20) Neutral Nations Inspection

Teams”. Each team would have four officers, half of which from each side.²

The work of the NNSC, 1953 to 1991

The NNSC inspection teams dispatched to North Korea in August 1953 were prevented from undertaking their tasks in violation of the Armistice Agreement guaranteeing “...full convenience of movement...”. Since the agreement contains neither a proper mechanism for overseeing compliance nor enforcing sanctions for violations, no counteraction could be taken. Inspections were originally made in South Korea and reports were made on UN troop rotations and replacement of combat material for the armed forces to the UNC.

However, already in spring 1954 the Swedish-Swiss efforts to implement unified inspection routines in accordance with the Armistice Agreement had failed making the work entirely dependent on the information the two sides chose to supply. On April 14, 1954, restrictions similar to those that had been implemented in North Korea were imposed in South Korea. No original documents were shown any longer and inspections of rotations of personnel as well as replacements of combat material could only be made following applications. At the same time, the NNSC also suffered from internal conflicts since Czechoslovakia and Poland in some cases of dispute on inspections of armistice violations and introduction of combat materials had different views hampering work.

Due to the North’s rearmaments, South Korea and the United States wanted to dissolve the NNSC and cancel the Armistice Agreement in order to be free to modernize the combat forces and restore the military balance, but at the same time both sides violated Paragraph 13(d). The NNSC could not prevent rearmaments. Eventually, on May 31, 1956 at the 70th MAC meeting the UNC suspended the validity of all provisions in the Armistice Agreement regulating the work of the NNSC and its inspection teams, except Paragraph 13(d). From June 10-12, 1956 all teams were withdrawn to Panmunjom.

The Swiss Colonel Urs Alfred Mueller-Lhotska, who served in the Swiss NNSC Delegation 1994-1996, points out that the NNSC “became a ‘Commission without Supervision’ and thus also *without a mission*; its function was essentially reduced to a purely symbolic institutional presence.” On the other hand, he notes that this presence aimed to manifest “... the vital importance to both parties of the 1953 Armistice Agreement” but also that “Since the May-June 1956 the NNSC’s activities have lacked

the basis of the armistice parties' mutual agreement." When the teams were withdrawn to Panmunjom and reduced, the NNSC became incapable of conducting inspections. From now onwards, the work would instead mainly consist of analytic work by evaluating reports on the rotation of personnel submitted by both sides and falsified combat materiel reports submitted only by North Korea.

In fact, the UNC had unilaterally declared at the 75th MAC meeting held on June 21, 1957 that Paragraph 13(d) would be suspended "...until military balance was restored and the northern side proved by actions its intention to observe the provisions of the AA." Thus, a stumbling block for introducing new weapons was removed. The UNC informed the NNSC about its decision the same day. Reporting to the NNSC ceased. For replacements of combat material, discontinuation was definitive but for the rotation of military personnel temporary. The cancellation of Paragraph 13(d) further reduced the NNSC's tasks. Mueller-Lhotska (1997) writes: "Its essential role now consisted of a mere symbolical presence aimed at manifesting the vital importance to both parties of the 1953 Armistice Agreement." Following the suspension of the paragraph, the NNSC was no longer a stumbling block for rearmaments by the UNC and South Korea that both came to regard the Commission as a useful body. The South also feared that a dissolution would be a propaganda victory for the North. The NNSC became a symbol of peace and its presence a stabilizing factor between the two armies ready to fight.³

In 1968, 1976 and 1984 the NNSC made specific contributions to secure peace. The Korean War was only replaced by negative peace. In 1968, negative peace reached a peak on the basis of the number of killed North Korean, South Korean and American soldiers. On January 23, 1968 a North Korean Navy patrol boat forcibly boarded and illegally seized in international waters off Wonsan the American intelligence vessel, the USS Pueblo, that had departed from Japan on January 8. The Pueblo incident could have caused a new war. At the 261st MAC meeting held on January 24, the UNC charged North Korea with having illegally seized the ship in international waters and demanded its immediate return but the North claimed that an armed spy ship had infiltrated into its coastal waters on January 23.

At this time, the Swedish NNSC Delegation realized that the situation was very urgent. The Swiss Delegation Chief expressed the same views. On January 29, the Swedish and Swiss members told the UNC/MAC Senior Member that the time was ripe for negotiations. The opportunity

should not be hindered by procedural issues. Since private American-North Korean negotiations were guided throughout the whole process by the US State Department, not by the UNC, NNSC participation was covered up, as was the North's demand that the role of the NNSC should not be mentioned. The first private meeting was held in the NNSC Conference room on February 2. The Commission played an important role as contact body during the Pueblo affair since messages were conveyed through the NNSC. On December 23, 1968, the UNC made a false confession only to save the 82-man crew (originally 83).

On August 18, 1976 tension between the two Koreas reached a peak. UNC guards wanted to cut down a tree to see better between two checkpoints, but did not inform North Korea in advance since it did not anticipate that the North's security guards would protest what the UNC regarded as a routine mission. Work began peacefully, but when North Korean guards soon arrived at the location tension escalated. In the ensuing fighting that lasted only three-four minutes two American soldiers were beaten to death by clubs, metal pipes and axes. At the 379th MAC meeting held on August 19, the UNC and North exchanged accusations and counteraccusations that were refuted. In spite of their rigid practice to be strictly neutral, Swedish and Swiss NNSC officers made it known that they definitely did not approve of the axe murder.

On August 21, all but three meters of the tree was cut while the UNC made a massive demonstration of military strength in the area to which North Korea did not respond. Swedish and Swiss NNSC representatives observed the action. That war did not break out shows that both sides wished to maintain peace. On the same day, North Korea made an excuse for the incident. Following the North's proposal at the 380th MAC meeting held on August 25 to divide the Joint Security Area (JSA) and to prevent security guards from both sides to enter the other side in order to prevent a recurrence of a similar incident, the South accepted the proposal on August 29. The NNSC played an important role by "supervising" all six meetings held by the MAC Secretariat between August 31 and September 6 outside the meeting room. All meetings were held in a comparatively free atmosphere and the usual propaganda elements were completely absent. The only exception was the September 1 meeting when tension rose within a limited area and "reinforcements" were made by both parties. The presence of NNSC personnel between the two sides actively prevented a further escalation.

On November 23, 1984, the Foreign Service Officer Vasily Yakovlevic Matuzok at the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang defected via the military demarcation line (MDL) when he was leading a 16-member Soviet sightseeing group visiting Panmunjom. When the group walked out of the MAC conference building, he ran past the North Korean guards between this building and the UNC Joint Duty officer's building, crossed the MDL and shouted "Help me, cover me!" Although the division of the JSA aimed to prevent a recurrence of deadly incidents, when North Korean guards ran ahead of him southwards the outcome was the first and last exchange of fire between the opposing security forces for 20-30 minutes. Three North Korean guards and one South Korean guard were killed. Matuzok could safely leave the area unhurt and was later granted political asylum in the United States.

When the incident occurred, a few NNSC delegates were in its conference room. North Korea requested the Czech and Polish officers to immediately return to their respective camps and no representatives of these countries therefore showed up anymore that day. After the UNC headquarters in Seoul had approved the North's request for a cease-fire, Swedish and Swiss NNSC officers helped to enforce it. As in 1968 and 1976, the mutual wish to reduce tension formed a positive symmetry for the NNSC to act upon. Officers also went to the North's staff building Panmungak to find out whether any soldiers were missing. On January 22 and February 9, 1985, the NNSC presented proposals to improve security arrangements in the JSA that were adopted. On April 15, a telephone line that connected all NNSC countries was for the first time brought into use to clear urgent problems and reduce possible tension in the JSA. In the summer, some 20 mobile TV cameras were installed along both sides of the MDL in Panmunjom and put into operation for control purposes. Megaphones were in readiness. As in 1976, the NNSC now helped to make a serious incident an opportunity to introduce security-augmenting measures.⁴

The work of the NNSC after 1991 and its expanded tasks

The NNSC has clearly contributed to secure peace but, as had been the case in the 1950s, its ability to implement its tasks were drastically undermined in the 1990s. In 1991, the appointment of South Korean Major General Hwang Won Tak as UNC Senior Member worsened relations between North Korea and the NNSC. North Korea argued that since South Korea was neither a signatory of the Armistice Agreement nor a member

of the UNC it could not represent the UNC. From 1991, North Korea regarded the MAC and the NNSC as paralyzed and unnecessary. The 459th MAC meeting held on February 13, 1991 became the last but informal meetings were yet held. In 1994, the KPA pulled out of the MAC. On May 9, 1991, the KPA/CPV informed representatives that reports on rotation of personnel and replacements of combat materials in accordance with Paragraph 13(c) and 13(d) would not be delivered any more. From this time onwards, no minutes and reports were received from the NNSC. As a consequence of the political upheavals in Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia and Poland were no longer regarded as neutral. North Korea did not recognize the Czech Republic as a successor state of Czechoslovakia but a new nation and expelled it in April 1993 followed by Poland in February 1995. However, Polish officers continued their work from home and occasionally returned to sign whenever possible the NNSC Summary Records, evaluation reports and to approve the agendas. Eventually, on May 3, 1995, the KPA prohibited in violation of the Armistice Agreement NNSC personnel from crossing the MDL without special permission.

Previously, although prime-minister talks led to the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula on December 31, 1991 that was ratified in February 1992, the closer relations would soon be broken by North Korea's suspected nuclear ambitions. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, North Korea could no longer rely on Soviet military might to deter American military strength and thus speeded up its nuclear program to restore the balance of terror on the Korean peninsula. Distrust between North Korea on one hand and the United States and South Korea on the other created in 1993-1994 fears of a new war for the third time following the 1968 Pueblo incident and the 1976 axe murder. However, a negotiated solution was reached following high-level American-North Korean talks in the signing of the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994. America would provide North Korea with two light-water reactors, replacing graphite moderated reactors, and deliver crude oil until the first reactor was completed.

Meanwhile, the NNSC was isolated from the North creating room for it to undertake new tasks aiming at confidence-building. Since the NNSC partly lost its functions, there was a need to find a new way to use the Commission in order to show that the armistice still functioned. In 2005 the NNSC got expanded tasks, including observation of military exercises and operations in South Korea. The expanded tasks was an outcome of an

agreement with the UNC and South Korea but not from Czechoslovakia and Poland that had been expelled from the area. South Korea wanted to have increased international presence in the conflict zone. The Americans were interested to increase international participation in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) after leaving control of then JSA security battalion to South Korea. As a result, there were even fewer Americans in the area.

Consequently, it was in the interest of both the NNSC and the UNC/MAC to expand the tasks of the NNSC. In order to do so, a formal request to implement the expanded tasks came from the Commander of the UNC. However, the initial idea to expand tasks was brought up by the NNSC generals followed by deliberations with the Americans in the UNC and eventually with South Koreans. Four tasks were initially agreed upon in 2005 but only one of them was entirely new. Two were observation of helicopter flights in the DMZ, but such had been done previously. A third, new task involved the NNSC participating in UNC/MAC's inspections in the DMZ. The fourth task was to observe joint military exercises in South Korea. Previously, the NNSC had observed exercises to receive information on how the South acted. These invitations were to official visiting programs with military attachés. All observations and reports were made only following invitation from the UNC. None of these tasks are specifically recorded in the Armistice Agreement but according to Paragraph 28 the MAC can request the NNSC to conduct special observations outside the DMZ. Thus, the expanded tasks were decided in the spirit of the Armistice Agreement, indicating that it remains an important document.

The purpose of the expanded tasks was to observe that exercises did not breach the Armistice Agreement and that they were deterrent and defensive. Since the implementation of the expanded tasks raised the NNSC's workload, Sweden added a fifth member to its delegation. To develop the expanded tasks took time and they were not fully introduced and formalized until 2010. As recorded by student Björn Luthander (2018), the main benefactors of the expanded tasks are the Armistice Agreement and the international arena since the purpose of them is to observe that actions follow the agreement. If the NNSC ensures that the South does not escalate tensions, North Korea knows that in case of an escalation focus will be on it as the escalator. Thus, control of one side effects the other. The global arena, and potentially North Korea, benefit from the expanded tasks since transparency rises. Everyone with an interest to keep tensions

low will benefit from knowing that the South does not escalate. In this way, the NNSC likely continued to preserve peace.⁵

The NNSC's contributions to secure peace

Regarding the importance of the NNSC to preserve peace, the author (2009) argues that following both parties' desire for peace and maintenance of "Balance of fear" through rearmaments, the work of the MAC and the NNSC is the main reason how peace has been maintained. As we have seen, there was risk for war in 1968, 1976 and 1993-1994 during the Pueblo incident, the axe murder and the North Korean nuclear crisis but there are no indications that the parties on any of these occasions wished to renew warfare. There were high levels of tensions, but when they reached a critical point both parties made the utmost efforts to reduce them and hold negotiations, in accordance with the "game theory," to maintain peace. The desire for peace is explained by the bitter experience of the Korean War that perpetuated division and caused millions of casualties, awareness that the war they are prepared for would cause enormous damage and the virtual impossibility to win a war and certainly not to know the outcome in advance.

Differently expressed, "Balance of fear" has prevented the renewal of warfare. "Balance of fear" has been maintained through amassing huge and well-equipped military forces and by stationing American troops in South Korea. Although the Armistice Agreement prohibits rearmaments, it would owing to the high level of mutual distrust have been virtually impossible to maintain peace through other means. In the author's opinion, rearmament has been and will continue to be a "necessary evil" to maintain peace.

The MAC has played a crucial role in maintaining peace as a communication forum for raising incidents, but most meetings have been characterized by a zero-sum game. Due to the impact of the war legacy and the Cold War, work has been characterized by a lack of trust and credibility that are necessary to pursue fruitful negotiations. In sharp contrast, during the 1968 Pueblo incident and the 1976 axe murder the MAC played a crucial role in resolving the incidents. Both through the MAC and the presence of American troops in South Korea, the UNC has made an important contribution to securing peace, which it would have been difficult for South Korea to achieve without this presence. The armistice could not have been maintained without the MAC.⁶

As a third party the NNSC has played a role in maintaining peace that no other body could have undertaken. During the 1968 Pueblo incident, the 1976 axe murder and the 1984 shooting incident in the Joint Security Area, the NNSC, on the basis of “positive symmetry”, played an important role in reducing tension and bringing the crises to an end. On the latter two occasions, the NNSC also contributed to the introduction of safety-enhancing measures. Otherwise, its mere presence has helped to reduce tension in the area and maintain stability. Significantly, the NNSC has long maintained informal contacts with both sides and was during the global Cold War era the only body with access to military headquarters in both Kaesŏng and Seoul. The words “Contacts away from the bargaining table in a relaxed atmosphere may contribute to the creation of good working relations” quoted in the Introduction apply well to the Commission’s work. The maintenance of informal contacts until the Korean People’s Army (KPA) closed the MDL for the Commission on May 3, 1995 was the most important contribution the NNSC could make to maintaining peace after it had been forced by the UNC to withdraw its inspection teams in 1956.

The Commission’s initial weaknesses were that the mandate was subordinated to the MAC member states that it was required to supervise, that both parties obstructed inspections of introduction of military equipment, the internal split in an East and West bloc due to the Cold War, the even number of members and the absence of a referee for decision-making. Following the withdrawal of the inspection teams, when the UNC in 1957 unilaterally cancelled Paragraph 13(d) prohibiting rearmaments the NNSC became “a Commission without supervision.” The NNSC could no longer prevent the MAC members to rearm. When North Korea from 1991 onwards worked to undermine the NNSC, it was further weakened. On both occasions, it was of the utmost importance that the NNSC continued its work. Otherwise, the armistice regime would have been further undermined. The NNSC has received continuous support from the UNC/MAC and the KPA has, while neglecting the NNSC, tacitly accepted the Swedish-Swiss presence. Such a situation shows that both parties are rather satisfied with maintaining the status quo. Both sides expressed appreciation of its contributions to securing peace during the years 1956-1991 when it was a “bridge-builder” between the two camps. Following the 1956-1957 events, the NNSC began to change its role from a military body to a military and diplomatic contact area between the two sides deviating from the role stated in the Armistice Agreement.

Since no other body could have fulfilled this task, the change of mandate that took place without amending the Armistice Agreement was significant for maintaining peace. Notably, both the MAC and the NNSC have undertaken tasks to promote peace outside the mandate, indicating a flexible approach on how to implement the agreement. Finally, an indication that the NNSC will remain important is that following the annual consultations held by representatives of Poland, Sweden and Switzerland in Korea on March 21-22, 2019 the parties in a joint statement reaffirmed their long-term contribution to contribute to a permanent peace solution on the Korean peninsula. They also exchanged views with representatives from the UNC, UNC/ MAC and the Ministry of Defense. As long as the Armistice Agreement is the only legal instrument to avoid hostilities on the Korean peninsula and is not superseded by a peace treaty, the NNSC remains important to maintain the armistice as well as in promoting transparency and confidence on both sides of the demarcation line.⁷

Notes:

¹ Data on the theoretical frameworks are from Gabriel Jonsson, *Peacekeeping in the Korean Peninsula: The Role of Commissions* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2009), pp. 4, 5, 6. Original quotation marks.

² *Text of the Korean War Armistice Agreement*, July 27, 1953, Paragraph 13(c), 13(d), 24, 36, 37, 40(a), (b), 41, 42(c), 43.

³ Jonsson, op. cit., pp. 18, 27, 33-34, 35-36, 66, 67, 82-83, 87, 88, 89, 94-95, 98, 114; Urs Alfred Mueller-Lhotska and Millett, Alfred R., *Swiss Mission to Korea in the Change of Times 1953-1997*. (Zürich and Prague: Transslawia, 1997), pp. 40, 70-71, 135. Italics in the original. The last quotation has original quotation marks.

⁴ Jonsson, *ibid.*, pp. 120, 144, 199, 201, 204, 205, 206, 210, 211, 224-225, 230-231, 233, 234, 235, 293, 294-296, 298-302, 303, 304-305, 306, 307-308, 349-353. Original quotation marks.

⁵ Jonsson, *ibid.*, pp. 379, 381-383, 384-385, 386-387, 389-390, 391, 403-404, 424-425, 428-429, 432, 434-435, 436, 486; Björn Luthander, *The NNSC under development: A historical institutionalist analysis* (Stockholm University, Department of Political Science, spring 2018), pp. 6, 21, 22, 23-27, 29, 30.

⁶ Jonsson, *ibid.*, pp. 372, 518-521, 522. Original quotation marks. The author also records the Armistice Agreement and the sunshine policy as factors contributing to maintain peace (*ibid.*, p. 518). When participating in events in Sweden, Republic of Korea Embassy officials often praise the role of the NNSC to secure peace.

⁷ Jonsson, *ibid.*, 523-525; Utrikesdepartementet, *2019 Joint Statement by Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission* (n. p., March 27, 2019), pp. 1, 2. Original quotation marks.