This Kind of War: Korea's Opening Operations
By John W. Kisner

What I've come to admire most about KOREA is its dramatic ebb and flow. Most OCS games share this quality, but none match Rod Miller's new design for speed of action. Interesting though the events of HUBE'S POCKET may be, a game in which an evening can be devoted to a single game turn is too slow to hold my attention. I also love DAK, but let's face it: during its lulls entire hours can be lost to a series of simulcasted turns. Game-time flies but my mind wanders.

KOREA commands full attention. The late-June curtain rises on Communists marching relentlessly forward. Double-turns are alternately hoped and feared, and every initiative roll seems more important than the one before. By mid-July, weather rolls take the same urgency: air interdiction is now the UN's forward line of defense. After a dozen turns it's already August, the month of early decision, and the invaders have just about completed the forty-hex hike from the border to Pusan. The UN's position is now reduced to the tiniest of perimeters, and our opening act climaxes in furious rage as North Korea desperately lunges for the UN's last supply port.

The game doesn't end here, of course, but that's all you have time for that first long Saturday. Your next two sessions feature more of the same frenetic action: MacArthur's triumph at Inchon comes barely a month past Communist high tide; another Saturday finds UN spearheads nearing the Yalu and China preparing to intervene. I confess that pacing does slow once the CCF gets involved, but those first four months are a wild ride. If my group is anything like yours, you'll want to play this again and again, testing new strategies and perfecting old ones.

Experience has taught me what to expect, but I'm still surprised by each unfolding of events. General Sherman's words apply: KOREA, "like the thunderbolt, is swift and follows its own direction." There are no perfect plans, but general observations apply.

June: Opening Operations

Initially, the ROK is outnumbered in quantity (2:1 in steps) and overmatched in quality. There is just one South Korean AR-4 infantry regiment; the NKPA has three, plus a trio of AR-4 or -5 armor battalions. With this disparity there is no chance of stalemate along the border, but Seoul itself can hold out for many turns. North Korea cannot bypass Seoul because all southward railroads lead past the city. Until those rails are under Communist control, a drive on Pusan cannot be fed.

There are two general approaches to defending Seoul. By holding it lightly, the ROK preserves regiments to die another day as "speed bumps" along the crucial double-line railroad that runs from the border all the way to Pusan. A token defense of Seoul– one ROK regiment in each of the three minor city hexes – is pretty easy to overcome, so you'll get no short-term complaint from the Comm player for adopting this strategy. What I like about this defensive scheme is that it conserves strength and does not risk losing more than a single step in any battle. The alternate defensive plan packs Seoul with more like six regiments and a hedgehog. Given some luck, this will check the main NKPA column for a few weeks.

If the UN tries to hold fanatically, the NKPA must move quickly to block Seoul's trace supply. Then concentrate all the artillery you can against the city. Each lucky step-loss from barrage will greatly accelerate the conquest, and a DG result is usually prerequisite for any attack. More gratuitous advice: keep some infantry reserves handy for exploit attacks when a good opportunity shows itself, and try to lead every attack with one of those precious AR-4 infantry regiments. Finally, take the exposed NE corner of the capital first. Its capture opens a trunk railroad to partially feed the advance down the central corridor, and this will make the slow grind at Seoul easier to bear.

KOREA makes a good 3- or 4-player game because fighting in the central corridor is easily made a detached command. (There's no room for a third command slot on each side because there isn't any "eastern corridor" to follow due to the lack of rails along that coast.) This area produces more than its

fair share of nail-biting moments. For a couple of reasons, maneuver should be preferred to combat in this secondary sector. The attack route is more direct than out west, so there's less urgency to the advance. It's also easier here to bypass strongpoints, which is good because initially there are no AR-4 regiments to lead attacks. The imbalance between the two drives is usually rectified after Seoul is taken, but the crucial fighting there (and later at Taejon) consumes so much ammo that it's still advisable to resist taking some of those 4:1 attacks and 13-point barrages. Experience shows the Communists rarely have enough supply in late July to push their advance to final victory. You'll be glad to have played the center conservatively when the enemy stops running and you can afford to drop both hammer and sickle on his position.

July: Enter the Americans

Over time, UN reinforcements tilt the balance. Task Force Smith packs no punch but delivers an early promise that help is on the way to South Korea. Roughly two regiments a turn will arrive over a six-week span in July and August. Initially, the US Far East Command (FEC) units are at reduced strength and quality, a 5-2-3 being typical. In August they are upgraded and the counterattacks begin. By Inchon, the US has a nice mix of AR 3-5 infantry regiments of 8-10 combat strength. Each of the formidable American infantry divisions is supported by a 30-factor arty regiment, tank battalion, and organic truck. Contingents from several other UN members set sail for Korea over the next few months, but they don't arrive until after the tide's turned.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. In early July, it's hard to think of anything beyond ways to slow the NKPA juggernaut. Steady ROK losses gradually increase the quantity imbalance to 3:1, and there can't be anything resembling a traditional defensive line until the Pusan Perimeter fight. This means that flanks are extremely vulnerable, especially within the context of a double-turn. UN confidence hits rock bottom in mid-month, when South Korea is down to maybe a dozen attack-capable units. They are being overwhelmed by a dozen North Korean divisions that have sights set on total victory.

Enter the Americans, center stage. Lead elements of the 24th and 25th divisions are in position by 15 July, and 1st Cavalry is waiting in the wings. Historically, the 24th Division was shattered defending along the Kum River. In playtests, Yanks were often held from combat outside the Pusan Perimeter. Those weak FEC regiments are no more able to blunt enemy spearheads than their South Korean allies, so some players figure it's wiser to sacrifice ROK regiments (loss of which is of lesser long-term consequence) in the hopeless delaying actions. Do consider using the Americans in July, though, if only because of their cheap rebuild cost (1 pax to replace instead of the normal two) prior to being upgraded. A stockpile of UN replacements is a strategic edge later on, but obviously there is no replacing Pusan.

The 24th might also shy from a stand along the Kum River because the NKPA central corridor advance is already threatening Kumch'on. Should this important crossroads fall, UN forces still holding to the west at Taejon and along the Kum River have a difficult time escaping to the Pusan Perimeter. They can drift toward Masan over that nasty terrain to the southeast, but supplying them there can be tough.

Regardless of where (or whether) the Americans are committed, the twin North Korean drives eventually converge at Kumch'on. It takes a while for that human river to flow on down to the Naktong River line. Clear weather slows the stream by allowing the burgeoning UN air force to interdict every highway and byway in the area. No-flight turns see the NKPA flood more quickly into position, but can they attack anyway? By now Communist supply dumps are nearly exhausted, so Taegu might hold a few turns by default. Remind the UN player not to get too comfortable: the war will heat up again come month's end.

Before turning the page on July, let's discuss North Korea's long-range missile, the game's only armored division. The crack 105th consists of three armor battalions (the best being a 6-5-8) and two motorized infantry regiments. It has no attached artillery, but does boast an organic truck. Given the expected late-July supply crunch, resist temptation to fuel the tanks for inconsequential moves and attacks. At full strength and hidden under a reserve marker, the 105th is a real or

imagined threat to the entire UN line. This is your trump card during the opening operations; play it wisely.

After helping to clear the approaches to Seoul, what I like to do is immediately consolidate the 105th and swing it across the Han River to isolate the city. From there it can punish a too-aggressive ROK player by striking deeply into the enemy rear, or more likely wait until the infantry captures Seoul before leading the march to the Kum River. Now the real fun begins. Once they reach the southern map, given a double-turn and careless play by the UN, the tanks are in position to shut down all UN supply ports. Doing so doesn't guarantee victory – counterattacks are inevitable and an LST can be deployed as an emergency port – but it sure gives your opponent something to worry about. He should respect this threat by putting an ROK shield in front of western Pusan (and garrison eastern Pusan with newly-arrived Americans). That organic truck can still fuel the 105th forward, but now it must fight (using internal stocks) to get adjacent to (and shut down) both port hexes.

August: High Tide Ebbs

North Korea is now close to victory. The "Final Pusan Line" is drawn tightly around the great Korean port, and the UN will often voluntarily withdraw to this position to defer combat as long as possible (meanwhile building air and ground strength). Packing tightly around the final objective helps ensure the port stays open, but also means that a few lucky dierolls might end the game. Any further retreat means automatic defeat. We've reached the month of decision, in more ways than one.

The order of arrival puts everything into focus. Scheduled to debark on 29 July are the first AR-4 American units. A turn later the USMC with their AR-5 swagger enter to thunderous UN applause. By 8 August, when the first FEC upgrades are implemented, the balance of power has definitely shifted. If Pusan is still functioning, the serious chance that Korea will unite under Communist rule has just reached its expiration date. All in the course of two short weeks.

Let's rule out one choice immediately. North Korea cannot just run away and await Chinese intervention (which is what at least one early playtester wanted to do!). Beginning 5 August, the NKPA must maintain at least six divisions in the Pusan Perimeter Zone (PPZ). A special rule whacks a misbehaving Comm player twice across the knuckles: abandoning the PPZ slows his variable supply flow and speeds arrival of enemy reinforcements. So much for withdrawing to Manchuria before September.

Planning must also take into account the cruel reality that Inchon is coming and the bulk of North Korea's army is handcuffed to the PPZ until it's too late to escape. To put this into game-perspective, try playing a few turns of the Inchon Campaign Start. It won't take long to get a taste of the invasion's devastating effect on North Korean logistics. (All rails lead through Seoul, remember?) It's apparent that no Communist will walk out of the PPZ alive; only the lucky few riding tanks or trucks have much chance to recross the 38th Parallel.

So the final decision comes to this: should the assault on Pusan continue after all realistic hope is gone? It's a coin toss for me. It will be months before there is another opportunity to kill a few US steps via attack or barrage. Another argument favoring fixed bayonets is that these guys are all gonna die anyway, so they might as well take somebody with them. On the other hand, one too many banzai charges can expose the Communists to a rapid series of devastating airstrikes and counterattacks. These can leave the NKPA so weak at August's end that the breakout from the Pusan Perimeter hits Seoul about the same time MacArthur's boys are hitting the beach. There is wisdom in deciding to conserve strength for delaying actions, and supplies to feed the army after the southerly rails are cut.

There are few extended moments in wargaming more exciting than those last few turns of Red Tide. (Inchon and the race to the Yalu comes pretty close, but that's another story.) I start each game of KOREA planning to do something different or finally get another thing right. The best consolation, even when I fail, is knowing there's still plenty of time and desire to do it all over again. Thanks, Rod, for turning "The Forgotten War" into such an unforgettable wargame.