The choice of participants

Article 60 of the Panmunjom agreements provided for the convening of a political conference to discuss the future of Korea. Preparatory discussions were held at Panmunjom throughout 1953 and into 1954, but they led nowhere. Only at the Berlin Foreign Minister Conference in early 1954 was agreement reached. The political conference was to be held in Geneva in the spring of the same year, and it was to have two parts: one relating to the future of Korea and another to the situation in Indochina.

One of the many issues complicating the preliminary talks in Panmunjom was the issue of participants. The wording of the ceasefire documents, that stated that ‘both sides’ would be represented at the conference, left some questions open. Would this include the Russians, and if so, in what capacity? Could this also include the neutrals, India in particular? These questions were not settled until the foreign ministers met in Berlin in January 1954, yet they dominated the negotiations in Panmunjom throughout the autumn. During the course of the exchanges on the topic, a number of interesting references to neutrality were made. These are revealing with regard to the attitudes that prevailed in Washington and the views of the new administration in particular.

John Foster Dulles regularly dealt with the matter. On 13 August 1953, he sent the American chief delegate at the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, a brief set of instructions on the conference. It contained eight points, the first of which dealt with participation: ‘The Korean Political Conference should represent the two belligerent sides, as contemplated by Article 60 of the Armistice Agreement. It is not to
be a “roundtable” conference with the participation of neutrals.’ The neutral uppermost in Dulles’ mind was India. This became clear when Lodge talked to Krishna Menon a day later. Lodge thought that it would be a great embarrassment for the United States to have India at the conference ‘because of the well-known attitude of the President of Korea’, whose participation would be essential. To soften the impact of his words, Lodge then added the following comment:

I said that we had the greatest respect and admiration for India and were delighted that India was Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission. We felt grateful to India for having accepted this difficult post, thereby contributing to the ending of the hostilities.

The Indians got the message. As soon as 26 August, the American ambassador to India cabled Washington that Nehru did not seem to insist on participation, and a few days later Menon asked the UN General Assembly to withdraw a resolution calling for Indian participation.

The Communists, however, kept insisting on some form of neutral participation, and the Indians once more began to show some interest. In the course of a lengthy exchange between Dulles and Menon on 13 October, it became clear that, in some form or other, the Indians might be willing to serve as intermediaries once more. As a result, Dulles began to reconsider his position. Only a week later, he expressed the view that it might be possible to have India present as a reporter on the progress of the NNRC and that

if the Indians were there in some such capacity it might be possible for the Communists to use them as messenger boys with the other side... . India might be used as an intermediary under such circumstances without there being official Indian participation in the conference.

Dulles reiterated his position in a message to the special American Representative for the Korean Political Conference, Arthur H. Dean, thereby making neutral participation official policy. But the United States left Moscow out of its calculations. In early December, the Communist negotiators demanded that Russia, too, be permitted to attend the conference as a neutral! This was a reminder of the Russian move in 1952, when they had claimed neutrality in order to get a seat on the NNSC. Was this an attempt to frustrate a political conference