

**The United States and the Origins of the Korean War:  
The Failure of Deterrence**

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**ABSTRACT**

The North Korean attack on June 25, 1950 probably could have been avoided had the United States made a greater effort to signal a readiness to resist it by force. The United States failed to engage in such an effort due to strategic considerations, bureaucratic and domestic politics, and the decision-making model employed by President Harry S Truman, in which the commander-in-chief was relatively disengaged on foreign policy issues until the point of crisis was reached.

Keywords: deterrence, bureaucratic, domestic, politics, model, decision-making.

## **Introduction**

The North Korean attack on South Korea on June 25, 1950 and the subsequent US intervention to contain it represent the beginning of the Korean War as we know it. One key to its origins is the division of Korea at the end of World War II into Soviet and American occupation zones. Another is the creation by the occupying powers in 1948 of two hostile, competing governments on the peninsula, both of which wanted to use force to reunify the country.

While these actions represent necessary causes of the war that followed, they are not sufficient ones. North Korea could not have developed a decisive military advantage over its enemy to the south without Soviet assistance in the form of tanks, heavy artillery, and airplanes. Approval for the attack by Soviet leader Joseph Stalin was a prerequisite to provision of the necessary materiel assistance and aid in devising a detailed plan for a major military offensive. Although North Korea's Kim Il-sung had pleaded for Stalin's several times during 1949, it was not until January 30 of the following year that his Soviet mentor indicated a willingness to consider the idea sympathetically.<sup>1</sup> During Kim's visit to Moscow from March 30 to April 25, 1950, Stalin gave his blessing to an attack, but only if Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong gave his consent as well. That consent, if grudging, came in mid-May.<sup>2</sup>

Why did Stalin change his mind? The best answer is twofold. First, as a result of US Secretary of State Dean Acheson's National Press Club speech of January 12, 1950 omitting South Korea from the US defense perimeter in the Pacific and possibly Soviet espionage in Washington, Stalin believed that the United States would not intervene militarily to save the Republic of Korea (ROK) were it attacked.<sup>3</sup> Second, as a result of the Communist victory on mainland China and the subsequent successful negotiations with Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong in Moscow in January and early February 1950, he believed that he had an ally in Beijing who could be relied upon to counter an American military move into Korea in the unlikely eventuality that it occurred.

Mao's decision to seek an alliance with the Soviet Union was beyond the control of the United States, but it could have prevented Stalin from reaching the conclusion that it was unlikely to intervene to save an ROK under attack from the north. The question is, why did the United States fail to do more between the final withdrawal of its combat units from the peninsula in June 1949 and North Korea's attack a year later to deter that eventuality? It is this question that I seek to answer in this paper.

## **Korea and the Evolution of US Strategy**

The first step in answering the above question is to recount the evolution of American strategy in the aftermath of World War II. Europe, with its strong resource and industrial bases and its strong connections to US trade and heritage, represented the top priority. Korea was a long way from Europe, and it possessed no resources on which that continent depended. Yet the peninsula did occupy a position of some importance in northeast Asia. As a State Department paper concluded during the fall of 1943,

Korea may appear to offer a tempting opportunity [for Soviet premier Stalin] ... to strengthen enormously the economic resources of the Soviet Far East, to acquire ice-free ports, and to occupy a dominating strategic position in relation to both China and to Japan.... A Soviet occupation of Korea would create an entirely new strategic situation in the Far East, and its repercussions within China and Japan might be far reaching.<sup>4</sup>

This analysis became increasingly compelling as World War II progressed, as a weak and divided China showed little promise of helping to fill the power vacuum in northeast Asia likely to arise following Japan's defeat. More and more, a US presence on the continent appeared to be the only means of countering growing Soviet influence, a perception reinforced by Soviet behavior in Eastern Europe. Although the August 1945 decision in Washington for an American occupation of half the peninsula was entirely consistent with the assumption throughout the war that Koreans were incapable of governing themselves and needed a period of outside tutelage before being granted independence, the rush of US forces there in the aftermath of Japan's surrender represented a clear attempt to contain Soviet expansion.<sup>5</sup>

The August 1945 decision, however, came while US forces were fully mobilized. Rapid demobilization occurred following Japan's surrender, and this could not help but force planners to think about priorities. That thinking came to a head during 1947, as relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated to a point where—in the context of conditions in western Europe and the Mediterranean—Washington felt compelled to take on responsibilities abroad heretofore unheard of in peacetime. In March the Democratic administration of Harry S Truman presented a bill to Congress for \$400 million in economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey. By May

leaders in the executive branch were thinking about a program of economic assistance to western Europe that made the Greek-Turkish aid program look like spare change. It also was dangling before the Republican-dominated Congress an aid program for Korea that could cost \$600 million over a three-year period. In an era in which people, even politicians, took balanced budgets seriously, and in which the American aversion to high taxes was as intense as ever, something had to give.

What gave was economic aid to Korea and the military budget. Congressional leaders refused to consider the administration's plan for Korean aid, thus relegating support for the US occupation of the peninsula to relatively small, incremental measures rather than a grand package. Congress then passed an appropriations bill for fiscal year 1948 that reduced the army's civilian employees by 58,371 and officers by 12,500 from the already austere request of the executive branch. Such events occurred in the context of deteriorating conditions in South Korea and a continued stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union over methods to end the peninsula's division.<sup>6</sup>

In late April 1947, military planners in Washington had presented a rationale for the continued application of containment to Korea, including the economic assistance package, as follows:

... this is the one country within which we alone have for almost two years carried on ideological warfare in direct contact with our opponents, so that to lose this battle would be greatly detrimental to United States prestige, and therefore security, throughout the world. To abandon this struggle would tend to confirm the suspicion that the United States is not really determined to accept the responsibilities and obligations of world leadership, with consequent detriment to our efforts to bolster those countries of western Europe which are of primary and vital importance to our national security.

The planners went on to say, however, that

... this suspicion could quite possibly be dissipated and our prestige in these same western European countries enhanced if a survey of our resources indicated we could not afford to resist our ideological opponents on all fronts and we publicly announced abandonment of further aid to Korea in order to concentrate our aid in areas of greater strategic importance to

us.<sup>7</sup>

This possible course reflected the fact that the Joint Chiefs of Staff considered Korea as above only the Philippines in strategic importance to the United States and that Greece, Italy, and Iran, in addition to western Europe, held higher priority for American aid.<sup>8</sup>

By September 1947 it was clear to the Joint Chiefs that the Soviet Union would not agree to an acceptable plan for ending Korea's division and that Congress was not disposed to provide funding adequate to sustain the US position on the peninsula. With this in mind, they concluded that, "from the standpoint of military security, the United States has little strategic interest in maintaining ... troops and bases in Korea." The United States would bypass the peninsula in any offensive military operations on mainland Asia and, although with control of Korea the Soviet Union might "interfere with United States communications and operations in East China, Manchuria, the Yellow Sea, Sea of Japan and adjacent islands," that threat could be neutralized with air power based in Japan and Okinawa. The military leaders wanted an early, voluntary withdrawal from Korea, as a delay in such action might result in a subsequent withdrawal under the pressure of disorder and unrest in the south, which would inflict a much larger blow to America's worldwide prestige.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the State Department remained committed to the view that US prestige was fundamentally engaged in Korea and, therefore, that US withdrawal from the south should occur in a manner that offered at least some prospect for keeping a portion of the peninsula out of communist hands. Since a US withdrawal during the fall of 1947, even if accompanied by the simultaneous departure of Soviet troops in the north, surely would lead to civil war and, in all likelihood, the unification of Korea by the communists, the United States should stretch out the withdrawal process until an indigenous government existed in the south with some chance for survival. The best among a series of flawed options, the State Department believed, was to take the Korean issue to the UN General Assembly, which the United States dominated, and propose UN supervised elections throughout the peninsula as the first step in creating a unified, independent government. If the General Assembly passed the proposal and the Soviet Union went along, which was far from certain, nationwide elections would occur, with the possible result that the communists would win. If the process was orderly and fair, however, this was a result with which the United States could live.

On the other hand, if the Soviets refused to permit all-Korean elections, the United States could return to the General Assembly and push for the process in the south alone. This would likely result in an anti-communist government there, which with the blessing of the United Nations and US military and economic assistance, would have a fighting chance to endure.<sup>10</sup>

During the fall of 1947 and the first half of 1948, the United States implemented this plan. The result was that, on May 10, 1948, UN-supervised elections occurred in the south alone, with right-wing candidates emerging victorious. Over the next three months, the victors wrote a constitution and selected Syngman Rhee as the first president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), which was inaugurated in Seoul on August 15. The Soviets followed suit in September by establishing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North. During the fall of 1948, the UN General Assembly recognized the ROK as the legitimate government in the territory under its control, meaning below the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Meanwhile, the State Department resisted Pentagon efforts to hasten the withdrawal of US troops from Korea. With the Rhee government performing poorly during its early months and guerrilla uprisings breaking out in several provinces of South Korea, the State Department insisted on keeping some 8,000 American troops in the ROK beyond the end of 1948, when the last Soviet forces withdrew.<sup>11</sup>

Under continued pressure from the Pentagon and with conditions improving somewhat in South Korea, the State Department finally, and with considerable reluctance, gave its consent to total withdrawal in the spring of 1949, with the process reaching completion in June. As a precondition, the Truman administration left behind a 500-man military advisory group in the ROK to assist in training its armed forces and substantial light arms and ammunition. The administration also sent to Congress a program for economic assistance to the ROK.<sup>12</sup>

These measures were hardly the equivalent of American action regarding Western Europe. A program of massive economic assistance was well underway there, two US occupation divisions remained in West Germany, and the Truman administration had signed the North Atlantic Treaty, in which the United States guaranteed the defense of Western European nations. In contrast, the United States refused to offer a security treaty to the ROK or even given public assurances that it would be protected in the face of outside attack.<sup>13</sup>

In private, Army chief of staff Omar N. Bradley, soon to become the first official chairman of the Joint Chiefs, presented a study outlining US options in the event of a North Korean attack on South Korea. The study conceded that the commitment of American troops under such circumstances would be “unsound” militarily, but might be warranted for “political considerations,” contingent on support in the United Nations.<sup>14</sup> That conclusion reflected the divide between military leaders and their diplomatic counterparts, the former of whom viewed global strategy in terms of access to resources and key choke-points in the transportation of goods and manpower, as well as the capacity to attack the Soviet Union with overwhelming force, and the latter for whom such issues were joined with political/psychological factors, especially the credibility of the United States, with allies and adversaries alike, in resisting encroachments on its interests and commitments.

### **Domestic Politics and Deterrence in Korea**

We saw above how congressional austerity influenced the Pentagon on the US presence in Korea and helped to create a division in military and diplomatic perspectives on American interests in Korea. Opinions on Capitol Hill and divisions within the executive branch continued to influence US policy toward Korea through the early months of 1950, and they played a critical role in compromising deterrence.

President Truman is highly rated among most historians for making strong appointments to top positions regarding matters of national security—with the exception of Louis Johnson, who was appointed secretary of defense in March 1949. Johnson was a big, blustering, bullying man with some background on defense matters; but he received his appointment as a reward for heading fund-raising operations for the president’s election campaign the previous year. Himself reputed to possess presidential ambitions, his foremost passion as defense secretary was to “cut the fat” out of military spending, a cause for which his boss, a fiscal conservative with hopes to expand spending on the welfare state at home, had considerable sympathy.<sup>15</sup>

Although Truman was a believer in balanced military forces, he was frustrated during the early years of his presidency with the inability of the armed services to reach agreement on missions.<sup>16</sup> In his mind this failure produced unnecessary redundancies and his solution to the problem was to set an arbitrary cap on military spending and then let the Joint Chiefs, with oversight from the service secretaries, wrangle over

how to slice up the pie. If nothing else, Johnson was a master at knocking heads among the military brass and his efforts gained reinforcement from the Budget Bureau, which evaluated the proposals from the Pentagon in the context of the overall budget before passing it on to the White House. Congress had the final say, of course, and the key appropriations committees of the House and Senate tended toward austerity, even after the Democrats regained control in January 1949.

The result was that, despite expanding US commitments abroad, military spending for the fiscal years 1949 and 1950 remained low and the army continued to suffer cuts in personnel. After the Soviets tested an atomic device and the Communists marched to victory on mainland China during the second half of 1949, rumblings began to be heard in both the executive and legislative branches. Early in the spring of 1950, an interdepartmental committee of the former even produced a lengthy paper, NSC-68, claiming a need to expand military spending several-fold over the next four years. Yet no action was taken on the proposal before the North Korean attack in June. With Truman in the White House, Johnson in the Pentagon, and fellow fiscal conservatives dominating the budget process in Congress, little chance existed of a major reversal on defense spending without a crisis abroad.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of austere budgeting on military strategy was to place primary emphasis on the use of air power and atomic weapons for a direct attack on the Soviet Union should it launch a conventional invasion of Western Europe. If the initial air offensive did not induce a Soviet retreat, then the United States could rely, over time, on its superior capacity to mobilize its economy for war. Insofar as the western Pacific entered into war planning, Japan and Okinawa provided the main setting for a strategic defensive.<sup>18</sup>

What if North Korea attacked southward in a move not accompanied by Communist attacks elsewhere? Prevailing wisdom in the Pentagon was that if anything needed to be done militarily in such circumstances it would be with air power based in Japan and Okinawa.<sup>19</sup> Some reports in the spring of 1949 estimated that North and South Korean military forces were relatively equal in strength, so it was not certain that US action would be necessary other than providing essential supplies.<sup>20</sup>

Given the North's capacity, with help from China and the Soviet Union, to greatly increase its military strength and the presence of some 80,000 US military personnel in nearby Japan, it certainly occurred to army officials that circumstances might arise in which their civilian



superiors chose to commit ground forces. This understanding should have generated interest both in planning for such a contingency and in engaging in efforts to discourage the enemy from creating such circumstances. Yet Army General Douglas MacArthur, the Far Eastern commander in Tokyo, who after the American occupation there ended held responsibility only for evacuating US personnel in case of an emergency, devoted little attention to peninsular affairs. After his brief visit to Seoul in August 1948 for Rhee's inauguration as president, neither he nor a top subordinate returned to South Korea until days after the North Korean attack of June 1950. Nor did he conduct military exercises with his forces in Japan in preparation for a possible dispatch to the peninsula, a move that might have conveyed a message of determination to Stalin. Separated from his putative superiors in Washington both in distance and state of mind, he did nothing aimed at deterring a North Korean attack. Top army officials at home failed to lobby MacArthur to do more, and they did nothing themselves, such as visiting the peninsula in an effort to convey concern and a measure of commitment.

For their part, air force and navy officials in Washington had little interest in assisting in planning for a return of US ground forces to Korea, or in initiating efforts at deterrence—although in the fall of 1949 at State Department behest, the navy did send a cruiser and two destroyers to visit Inchon harbor.<sup>21</sup> More concerned about maintaining or enlarging their share of the defense pie and about Soviet or Soviet proxy attacks in several places of greater strategic significance—West Berlin, the Balkans, Turkey, Iran, Indochina, and Taiwan, for example—they devoted little attention to Korea.

Domestic politics and a growing division between the State and Defense departments regarding Taiwan provided another impediment to advance planning for any major military operations in Korea, and even for a concerted effort at deterrence there. As 1949 progressed, pressure developed from Republicans in Congress and influential elements in the press for an effort to protect from Communist attack the remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces, which in the fall retreated to Taiwan. By the end of the year, the Joint Chiefs were arguing for such an effort as well, but the State Department resisted. "An unsinkable aircraft carrier" positioned 100 miles off the China coast, as General MacArthur characterized it, Taiwan was regarded by military leaders as more important than South Korea. They wanted to avoid any

commitment to the latter that would undermine their case for providing new aid to protect the former. On the other hand, Secretary of State Acheson feared that new aid to Chiang would further engage US prestige in a losing cause; yet he recognized that the Nationalists had a far larger constituency in the United States than did Rhee. He was in a weak position to press for increased support for South Korea while resisting the same for Taiwan. Indeed, in January 1950, shortly after his famous speech to the National Press Club, the House narrowly rejected a bill for continued economic and military aid to the ROK, largely because some members wanted in exchange the renewal of aid to Chiang. To keep the Korean aid program relatively intact, Acheson had to resubmit the bill to Congress along with a proposal to extend the deadline for the use of funds that had been appropriated to the Nationalists as far back as 1948.

In sum, domestic and bureaucratic politics reinforced the Joint Chiefs' assessment of September 1947 that saving South Korea was not of sufficient importance to warrant a major military effort, and their preoccupation with a variety of other issues prevented them from thinking through methods of deterring a North Korean attack. The State Department showed more concern about Korea, but was in a weak position to counter Pentagon indifference.<sup>22</sup>

### **The US-South Korean Relationship as an Impediment to Deterrence**

An additional impediment to effective deterrence was the shaky relationship between the United States and the ROK. Although the United States possessed the primary responsibility for creating the ROK, it had done so reluctantly and only after failed efforts to negotiate an agreement on unification with the Soviet Union. From late 1945 onward, Syngman Rhee and his allies had presented a roadblock in the negotiating effort, as they consistently attacked the Soviet Union and Korean communists in their public statements and then refused to mute their criticism of the Moscow agreement of December 1945 that left open the possibility of a five-year, four-power trusteeship over the peninsula. With Soviet-American relations in steady decline from early 1946 onward, the prospects for agreement between the occupying powers were never good, but Rhee's actions eliminated them altogether, forcing the United States to make a choice between conceding the peninsula to a pro-Soviet regime or adopting a course that would lead to continued division, with the extreme right in control of an independent government in the South. The choice of the latter as the lesser of evils augured ill for

smooth relations between the new government and its sponsor, and the poor performance of the Rhee government during its first months, its belligerence toward the North, and frequent pleas for more aid while often resisting American advice for reform did not help matters.

An illustration of the testy relationship between ROK leaders and American officials concerned with Korea came in May 1949, on the eve of the final withdrawal of US troops. At a time when the ROK army continued its struggle against sizable guerrilla operations in the southern provinces, it fought numerous battles with its northern counterpart along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, some of which it provoked. In the midst of such activities, the ROK government released a statement demanding either the continued presence of US forces or a concrete assurance of US protection against an outside attack. It also implied that the United States was responsible for the country's division because it had failed to prevent the entry of Soviet troops into the north in 1945. Already miffed by the lack of appreciation of many Koreans for the US role in freeing their country from Japan, American diplomats on the scene and in Washington responded sharply, insisting that the ROK government must do more to put its own house in order, including a buildup of its own army. When the South Koreans expressed concern about the United States distancing itself from the Nationalist regime in China as the Communists advanced there, the Americans retorted that they should learn from that case that outside aid could not stem the enemy tide unless indigenous forces put up a stiff resistance.<sup>23</sup>

Conditions in South Korea did improve some over the next year, but relations between the US and ROK governments remained testy. In early April 1950 the State Department even delivered a public note to the Rhee regime threatening to cut off aid unless it took action to curb inflation and reversed its recent decision to postpone until the fall National Assembly elections scheduled for the spring.<sup>24</sup> While Rhee did both, the trust level remained low. Rhee's ongoing belligerence toward the North made US Ambassador John Muccio wary of turning over large quantities of arms and ammunition to ROK forces for fear that they would be used to launch an invasion north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>25</sup> That belligerence also made many Americans reluctant to accept ROK intelligence reports of an impending attack by the DRPK.

## **Intelligence and the Failure of Deterrence**

Even so, during the spring of 1950 an increasing number of reports filtered into Washington to the effect that the recent buildup of North Korean forces had given them a dangerous advantage over their ROK counterparts.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Muccio had been pressing Washington for more military aid since the previous fall. His efforts culminated in May 1950 during a visit home. When he took the matter to the National Security Council, however, military officials, working with extremely limited resources and what appeared to be more pressing needs in other areas, told him they would act only if the State Department considered increased assistance necessary for political reasons. Although he received encouragement at State, especially regarding the possibility of receiving obsolete planes in the Far Eastern Command that were scheduled for cannibalization, he was unable on his way back to Korea to persuade General MacArthur, who was more intent on altering the US policy of no new military aid to Chiang on Taiwan, to go along. Frustrated, in early June he submitted a report to Congress asserting that “the undeniable material superiority of the North Korean forces would provide [them] ... with a margin of victory in the event of a full-scale invasion of the Republic.”<sup>27</sup> Yet other reports conflicted with Muccio’s, including ones by three senators who had visited the peninsula since the previous fall, and by Brigadier General William L. Roberts, the head of the Korean Military Advisory Group.<sup>28</sup>

Despite persistent warnings from early May 1950 onward by ROK Minister of Defense Shin Sung Mo, Muccio and others alarmed about the growing disparity in military power on the peninsula did not believe a North Korean attack imminent. One explanation is that the evidence behind the warnings came from South Korean intelligence operatives who infiltrated the North and were not entirely trusted by the Americans. Warnings of an impending attack extended all the way back to the fall of 1946 and by late 1949, as one member of the US Far Eastern Command G-2 in Tokyo later recalled, “talk of a North Korean invasion were almost routine in intelligence circles.”<sup>29</sup> False alarms of the past bred caution in reaching dire conclusions. Major General Charles A. Willoughby, the head of MacArthur’s G-2, sent numerous reports to Washington of an impending attack, but expressed skepticism. North Korea had not exhausted its prospects for taking the South “through guerrillas and psychological warfare,” he claimed in the winter of 1950, so a conventional invasion was premature.<sup>30</sup> Evidence of movements of

civilian residents out of areas just north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and stepped-up activity there by military forces were explained away, in the first case as part of a move toward collectivization in agriculture and in the second as part of a normal rotation and the need for increased security in the face of anticipated border clashes with ROK units. With substantial US forces stationed in nearby Japan, Far Eastern Command analysts were inclined to believe that the Soviet Union was more interested in promoting Communist efforts in Southeast Asia.

What would have happened had the assessments of intelligence by Muccio and Willoughby of May and early June predicted an impending attack, been endorsed by MacArthur, and presented in Washington? The distinguished military historian Alan R. Millett has recently expressed skepticism that it would have made much difference, as “it would have required a crisis-decision without a crisis.” President Truman, Secretaries Acheson and Johnson, the Joint Chiefs, and the Central Intelligence Agency, plus “several other executive agencies ... and the Congress would have had to agree to preempt the North Koreans,” meaning that they would have had to agree to send US forces back into Korea before an actual invasion occurred.<sup>31</sup> Consider that in the actual event of the North Korean attack it took over five days of intense deliberation in Washington, the passage of a UN Security Council resolution calling on members to aid the ROK, concentrated intelligence scrutiny that revealed no sign of plans for attacks elsewhere by Soviet or Soviet-proxy forces, and the clear-cut defeat of the ROK army by DPRK forces before Truman committed American troops to combat in Korea. In the end, it is hard to imagine Truman making this decision without the last of the above events.

The question remains, nonetheless, as to whether or not concerted efforts at deterrence might have been taken during the year following the withdrawal of American troops in 1949 that would have prevented Stalin from reaching the conclusion that the United States would fail to respond decisively to a North Korean attack. We can never know for sure, but given the presence of American military power, including troops, in Japan, the most reasonable answer is “probably.” That is, exercises involving those forces indicating that the United States was ready to intervene militarily in Korea, combined with visits by high military officials to the peninsula from Tokyo or Washington, or both, and suggestive if ambiguous statements of support for the ROK probably would have discouraged Stalin from giving Kim the go-ahead and

providing him with the means to overrun the ROK. Of course, the maintenance of a token US army unit in Korea, especially if deployed north of Seoul, would have added significantly to the deterrent.

Why were none of the above measures taken? The answer suggests a hierarchy of causation that follows the organization of this article. At the top of the hierarchy is the strategic calculus of the Joint Chiefs in the face of the expanding commitments of the early Cold War, deteriorating conditions in Korea, and the reduction of the military budget by Congress. As in many cases involving strategy, however, the devil is in the details. There was no reason why the above instruments of deterrence, with the possible exception of the maintenance of a contingent of ground troops in Korea, could not have been employed even within the resources available to the Pentagon and the Far Eastern Command. So strategic calculations must be regarded as a necessary but not a sufficient cause.

Next was the particular congregation of personalities in Washington and Tokyo from the spring of 1949 onward and the potential forces in the United States to which they responded. The presence as Far Eastern commander of a man aloof from Washington, surrounded by sycophants, and caring little about Korea but increasingly about Taiwan was part of the equation. The rise as secretary of defense of a man willing to carry President Truman's budget-cutting proclivities to an extreme and intent on restricting communications between the Pentagon and the State Department was another. Growing sentiment in Congress and the press during 1949 and early 1950 in favor of saving Taiwan from the Communist Chinese was a third part. Together, these made it next to impossible for the State Department, which held real concerns about South Korea's survival, to press for the kind of coordinated effort with the Pentagon that would have been necessary to deter Stalin. And they go far in explaining Secretary of State Acheson's ill-considered mention of the US defense perimeter in the Pacific in his speech of January 1950.

Finally, there was the American distrust of the Rhee regime, which behaved belligerently toward the North and sometimes conducted itself in a manner that did not inspire confidence in its capacity to govern. Rhee and his allies had frustrated Americans involved in the 1945-1948 occupation and had contributed to the growing desire of the US army to rid itself of the burden.<sup>32</sup> Now, the performance of the government reminded many in the Pentagon and State Department alike of the Nationalist regime in China, which more often than not had resisted the

advice of the United States, had attempted to draw the United States more deeply into the Chinese civil war, and now faced the prospect of extinction at the hands of the Communists.

Democracies tend to respond well to crises, but not to avoid them. This is because the complex nature of democratic political institutions and inputs into them make timely action difficult except in extreme situations. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States faced conditions unprecedented in past experience. Although its leaders responded well in dealing with crises in the eastern Mediterranean and Western Europe, the implementation of the strategy of containment was constrained by both the checks and balances inherent to a mature democracy and the uncertainties that accompanied the grappling with new circumstances.

Still, it is conceivable that a model of decision making other than the one followed by President Truman would have produced a better result. In search of such a model, we need go no further than the early stages of the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Truman's successor. Eisenhower had been a participant in much of the Truman administration, first as army chief of staff, then, after he left Washington to assume duties as president of Columbia University, as an informal chair of the joint chiefs, and, finally, as the first commander of NATO forces in Europe. Despite that service, and his general support for Truman's internationalist policies, Eisenhower believed that his predecessor's relative detachment from the decision-making process often failed to produce good decisions in specific cases, or to facilitate their implementation. Thus, early in his administration Eisenhower reformed the National Security Council to make it the key body in which disagreements within the executive branch were resolved, and *with the active participation of the commander-in-chief*.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike Truman, of course, Eisenhower possessed expertise on national security matters second to none, placing him in a strong position to both participate in and direct lively debates among his top advisers. The declassified minutes of National Security Council meetings during his stay in the White House clearly reveal this process, one that generally occurred in the Truman administration only in response to a crisis.<sup>34</sup> While Truman was probably incapable, by either experience or intellect, to play the dynamic role that Eisenhower would adopt, the latter's system might well have enabled the executive branch to devise more effective tactics for protecting US interests in Korea prior to June 1950. Under

this system, for example, a meeting of the National Security Council on Korea might have occurred in June 1949 as the final US combat unit withdrew from the peninsula. At such a meeting, the State Department and the Pentagon might have been forced, in Truman's presence, to confront the issue of whether or not US interests in Korea might warrant the return of American troops and, if so, under what conditions. Since strategic considerations made such a return undesirable, a determination that it might be necessary for political reasons presumably would have led to some agreement between the diplomats and the military as to how to prevent that eventuality. Such a process, in other words, might have been the first step in the practice of effective deterrence.

Given the complexity and uniqueness of the circumstances Truman faced, it would be unfair to judge him harshly for failing to avoid the crisis in Korea that developed in June 1950. Yet we can hardly doubt that the price of failure was high, especially to the Korean people. That fact makes it worthwhile to revisit the origins of the Korean War as a reminder to decision makers, present and future alike, that the best response to crises is often the advance preparation that prevents their occurrence.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project*, vol. 5 (spring 1995): p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> See Evgeniy P. Bajanov and Natalia Bajanov, "The Korean Conflict, 1950-1953: The Most Mysterious War of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century—Based on Secret Soviet Archives," English translation of unpublished manuscript based on the presidential Archives of the former Soviet Union, copy in author's possession, 38; Kathryn Weathersby, "'Should We Fear This?': Stalin and the Korean War" (paper presented at conference "Stalin and the Cold War," Yale University, September 1999), pp. 13-14; Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), .

<sup>3</sup> For Acheson's speech, see *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 22 (January 23, 1950), pp. 114-16.

<sup>4</sup> "Possible Soviet Attitudes toward Far Eastern Questions," October 2, 1943, Box 119, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-45, RG59, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>5</sup> James I. Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), pp. 38-44.



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<sup>6</sup> William Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy toward China and Korea, 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 81-85; Stueck, *The Wedemeyer Mission: American Politics and Foreign Policy during the Cold War* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1984), pp. 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947*, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1972), 744 (henceforth, volumes in this series will be referred to as *FRUS*, with the year and volume following).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 737-39.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 817-18.

<sup>10</sup> Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, pp. 84-95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-107.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-59.

<sup>13</sup> See Matray, *Reluctant Crusade*, pp. 190-95.

<sup>14</sup> *FRUS, 1949, 7: 1055.*

<sup>15</sup> For the most recent presentation along these lines, see Alan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came From the North* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), pp. 55-61.

<sup>16</sup> Author interview with James E. Webb, August 7, 1974, Washington, DC.

<sup>17</sup> Millett, *War for Korea, 1950-1951*, pp. 61-66.

<sup>18</sup> See "War Plan Fleetwood," November 29, 1948, 337 (TS), RG 319, National Archives II, College Park, Md.

<sup>19</sup> George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 511.

<sup>20</sup> Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> *FRUS, 1949, 7: 1093n.*

<sup>22</sup> Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, pp. 137-43; William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 29-30.

<sup>23</sup> See *FRUS, 1949, 7: 1011-21*; also Ambassador John Muccio's oral history at the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO. Muccio gave a similar account in his interview with author on December 27, 1973 in Washington, DC.

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For more detailed treatment of the poor state of relations between Americans and South Koreans during and immediately after the US occupation, see William Stueck and Boram Yi, “An Alliance Forged in Blood,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 3(April 2010): pp. 180-205.

<sup>24</sup> *Department of State Bulletin* 22(April 17, 1950): p. 602.

<sup>25</sup> Muccio interview with the author, Washington, DC, December 27, 1973.

<sup>26</sup> Unless otherwise noted, this section is based on Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, pp. 164-70.

<sup>27</sup> *Department of State Bulletin*, 22(June 26, 1950): p. 1049.

<sup>28</sup> Roberts’ reports were inconsistent (see Stueck, *Road to Confrontation*, pp. 166-67).

<sup>29</sup> US Department of the Army, *United States Army in the Korean War*, vol. 3, *Policy and Direction: The First Year*, by James F. Schnabel, 1972, pp. 62-63.

<sup>30</sup> US Far Eastern Command, *Intelligence Summaries*, March 25, 1950, Record Group 260, National Archives II, College Park, Md.

<sup>31</sup> Millett, *War for Korea, 1950-1951*, p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> On Army frustrations during the occupation of Korea, see Stueck and Yi, “An Alliance Forged in Blood,” pp. 180-205.

<sup>33</sup> Robert B. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 83-95, 99-105, 181-81.

<sup>34</sup> For examples of Eisenhower’s role in National Security Council meetings, see *FRUS, 1952-1954*, 1: pp. 514-34 and 567-76; and *ibid.*, pp. 2, 264-81.