

**The Role and Responsibilities of the United States  
in the Korean War: Critical Foreign Policy Decisions  
by the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Korean War was not inevitable. Neither was its scope and impact. Decisions by the U.S. government, and particularly the administration of Harry S Truman, made both division and war likely on the Korean peninsula. Had the U.S. reacted differently during the conflict, combat would have ended much earlier or expanded more widely. As always, hindsight clarifies. Some adverse consequences were more predictable than others. Policymakers operating in real time with limited information will always face a difficult challenge. However, several decisions surrounding the Korean War were based on a deeply flawed understanding of the facts or an equally flawed prediction of the consequences of particular actions. This article considers the merits of ten of the most consequential decisions made by U.S. policymakers affecting the onset and course of the Korean War.

Keywords: Korean War, Truman Administration, Syngman Rhee, Mao Zedong, Josef Stalin, Kim Il-sung, Dean Acheson, Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, Harry Truman, U.S. Foreign Policy, China, Soviet Union, United States, Taiwan, John Muccio, armistice, Chiang Kai-shek, Panmunjon, 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, atomic bomb, Cold War, military budget, Mutual Defense Treaty, prisoner repatriation, NSC 68

## **Introduction**

The responsibility for starting the Korean War remains most directly that of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) under Kim Il-sung. The Soviet Union and People's Republic of China (PRC) were complicit, having backed Kim's offensive. The South Korean government of Syngman Rhee also played a role, having provoked conflict and threatened war.<sup>1</sup>

Washington's decisions helped create the volatile geopolitical environment, determine the nature of the ensuing conflict, and define American involvement. Had the Truman administration acted differently, there would have been no divided peninsula and no war. Tragically, the U.S. "played a key role in the establishment of two separate governments in the Korean peninsula and ignored the potential for violence as well as the threat of an imminent war."<sup>2</sup>

The Korean War was small compared to the global conflagration which preceded it by barely five years. But the former's consequences still were enormous. The human costs were high. The division between the two Koreas deepened. The war drew the United States into a permanent role as the guarantor of East Asian security. The conflict created enduring hostility between Washington and the newly-created PRC. And the war militarized U.S. foreign policy.

None of these consequences was inevitable. Rather, they were the result of a series of decisions taken by policymakers looking through a glass darkly. Had Washington made different decisions at a number of key points, the futures of both the American and Korean peoples would have varied dramatically. This article considers ten decisions of particular import.

## **Decision 1: Disposing of the Korean Peninsula at the End of World War II**

Despite the efforts of émigrés like Syngman Rhee, who traveled to America for schooling and remained to organize politically, Washington paid little attention to the plight of Korea as a Japanese colony. Then came the Second World War. As Japan's collapse approached policymakers in Washington finally became concerned about the disposition of Korea—though, in one famous story, Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, Jr. had to request a map to locate the nation.

At Yalta in February 1945 Washington and Moscow agreed to a four-power trusteeship for the peninsula, but left the details undecided.

The U.S. was not prepared for Stalin's declaration of war against Japan, and, with Soviet troops racing for the peninsula, the U.S. requested that Moscow halt at the arbitrarily chosen 38th parallel. The two war-time allies agreed to establish a provisional government under a five-year trusteeship, with independence to follow.

The U.S.-Soviet partnership quickly broke down in Korea as well as Europe. After all, "the Americans and Soviets had mutually exclusive definitions of an acceptable political profile for a Korean government."<sup>3</sup> Plans for peninsula-wide administration and elections went unfulfilled as both superpowers proceeded to create client states in their own image.<sup>4</sup> The USSR promoted communist and anti-Japanese guerrilla Kim Il Sung, while the U.S. relied on conservative nationalists, like Rhee (though he was not initially America's preferred candidate), to the exclusion of local leftish leaders.

Observed historian Richard Whelan: "The United States was not wrong in wanting to prevent Korea from becoming a Soviet satellite. But if that aim was really so important, then the Americans were foolish indeed to postpone action until the very last minute and to approach the issue in such a confused and haphazard manner—a manner that could hardly have more effectively antagonized both the Koreans and the Russians if it had been explicitly designed to do so."<sup>5</sup> Tragically, the result was two Koreas, a bitter conflict, and a more intense Cold War.

The U.S. and its allies were bound to require Japan to surrender any lands conquered as a result of Japanese aggression, starting from the war against China. However, the Korean peninsula had a different status.

Since Korea had not been acquired as the result of recent aggression, the Truman administration could have formally left Korea under Japanese administration even as the U.S. occupied Japan. The reasons for not doing so were obvious. It would have been morally offensive to keep people subjugated by a discredited empire guilty of wartime brutality. Japanese control could only have been maintained by preserving a Japanese military presence or enforcing Japanese rule through an American occupation.

Washington instead pressed the Soviets to divide the peninsula despite possessing little knowledge of Korea, having no plans for the territory, and being unwilling to adequately see to either the land's political development or its military security. There were at least three alternatives.

One would have been to leave the peninsula to the USSR. In fact, Washington may have only narrowly avoided this outcome. Had Japan not surrendered in early August, Soviet involvement in the Asia-Pacific war would have been both more substantial and long-lived. Moscow then might have insisted on occupying the entire Korean peninsula, especially if the Truman administration had refused to provide the Soviets with an occupation zone in Japan.

Had the U.S. eschewed involvement on the peninsula, Washington would have reduced both a manpower and financial burden at a time of a rapidly shrinking military. The U.S. also would have avoided its central role in a civil war that turned into an enduring regional conflict, leading to three years of a very hot war and decades of policing a cold peace that endured even after the end of the Cold War. Equally important, there would have been no trigger—in June 1950, at least—for the virulent hostility between Beijing and Washington (later promoted by Stalin) and the militarization of the Cold War. Finally, the U.S. would have lost no credibility since none was at stake in Korea until Washington chose to get involved.

On the negative side, the U.S. would have suffered a slight geopolitical disadvantage, losing this foothold on the Asian mainland. However, until June 1950 the Truman administration treated South Korea as at most a marginal security interest.

In September 1947, as the Cold War was deepening, the Joint Chiefs of Staff declared that the Korean peninsula was strategically unimportant. They advocated a withdrawal of U.S. forces, carried out in 1949, since “from the standpoint of military security, the United States has little strategic interest in maintaining the present troops and bases in Korea.”<sup>6</sup> Prior to the invasion Gen. Douglas MacArthur maintained that the U.S. needn't defend the ROK.<sup>7</sup> The Pentagon acknowledged that such a drawdown meant that Soviet domination of the South would “have to be accepted as a probability.”<sup>8</sup> In his famous speech to the National Press Club on January 12, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson excluded the ROK, along with the rest of the Asian mainland, from America's strategic “defense perimeter,” though he later denied that he had meant that Korea would not be defended.<sup>9</sup> And the Joint Chiefs considered a withdrawal from Korea after China's entry into the war since “they still considered the peninsula a strategic backwater and thought it more important to preserve American ground forces for the defense of Japan and Western Europe.”<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the U.S. could have sought a geopolitical trade with Moscow elsewhere in Asia or even in Europe. Leave the Korean peninsula under Soviet control in return for concessions elsewhere. Such an approach looks unduly cynical today, but the post-war era was awash in similar deal-making.

The principal losers would have been the residents of the South, who would have ended up under a Stalinist tyranny for decades. Yet even here the balance is complicated: no division would have meant brutal repression but at least no conflict, saving millions of lives and sparing Koreans south and north the horrors of three years of war.

An alternative to Soviet control would have been to have turned Korea over to the oversight by the Chinese Nationalist government. History and geography offered some support for this choice. However, this disposition would not likely have been accepted by the Soviets or satisfied Korean independence activists. And the incompetent, authoritarian Chinese Nationalists, soon to be ousted in their own civil war, could not have been trusted to establish an effective government or defend the peninsula. Moreover, we now know that such a decision would have soon left Korea under Communist occupation, only by the PRC rather than the Soviet Union.

Lastly, the Truman administration could have proposed immediate independence as desired by most Koreans, perhaps overseen by some form of United Nations trusteeship. In principle, this would have been the best option. However, it would have been difficult for the Koreans to create a new state out of the old Japanese colonial structure. A civil war likely would have started almost immediately, with Communists battling nationalists: Kim Il-sung and Syngman Rhee would simply have staged an intra- rather than inter-state conflict. Nor is there much reason to assume that the Soviet Union and China (whether under Nationalists or Communists) would have eschewed the temptation to meddle in Korean politics. On the other hand, even under U.S. direction and protection democracy took more than four decades to fully develop in the South.

Washington's decision to push for an occupation zone ultimately redounded to the benefit of Koreans, at least those living in the Republic of Korea today. But the costs of division, a very hot conflict, and the ensuing Cold War were, and remain, high for all parties. The U.S. should not have taken on responsibility for the peninsula at the end of World War II if it was not willing to invest the resources necessary to create and protect an effective government under its control.

## **Decision 2: Establishing a Government in the Occupation Zone**

Having established a presence on the Korean peninsula on a largely ad hoc basis, the Truman administration found itself ill-prepared for nation building in a place and at a time when even the most sophisticated strategy would have had no guarantee of success. Unfortunately, the government created under American control contributed to the coming war.

The U.S. came to back Syngman Rhee, who returned to Korea on an American aircraft with Washington's somewhat mixed blessing.<sup>11</sup> His denunciations of the Soviets caused the occupation officials to look elsewhere for leadership. However, Rhee triumphed in the convoluted political process. Historians disagree over Washington's exact responsibility for his success, but tolerating him was in some sense the path of least resistance. James Irving Matray argued that "Administration officials, at least in Washington, honestly attempted to prevent a political triumph for Rhee during the first two years of the occupation."<sup>12</sup> Still, the resistance probably was not as firm as it was towards politicians of the left. After all, during this period Washington accepted the necessity of underwriting authoritarian regimes throughout the Third World.

Accepting Rhee, however reluctantly, had several notable downsides. No small matter was the moral repugnance of backing in the name of democracy someone prone to jail his opponents. Wrote Fred Inglis: "Ruthless is a word we tend to reserve for the enemy. In Korea it applied even-handedly."<sup>13</sup> Rhee's government proved to be a poor partner for the U.S. Of limited legitimacy, it generated substantial domestic opposition, increasing its vulnerability to subversion and war. Worse, Rhee could not be trusted with a military. His leadership was marked by aggressive rhetoric and action. U.S. Ambassador John Muccio admitted: "if we gave Rhee and his cohorts what they wanted, they could have started to move north the same as the north moved south."<sup>14</sup> Seoul could not even be provided with the weapons necessary to defend itself from the Soviet-backed North. In this way the Truman administration set up the circumstances leading to the North Korean invasion.<sup>15</sup>

Nor was Rhee a cooperative wartime partner. He steadfastly resisted ending the war on any terms other than allied victory, meaning a united Korea under his leadership, even attempting to sabotage the armistice negotiations. Rhee required the promise of extended security aid before

he acquiesced to ending hostilities.

None of this is to diminish Rhee's accomplishments. He was more successful than other Third World despots reliant on Western support in creating a new state. South Vietnam's disastrous revolving door government comes to mind. Nevertheless, the outcome was less than satisfactory for the U.S.

Washington should have considered alternative occupation strategies. One would have been to anoint someone else as America's preferred leader. Alas, it is easier to imagine a liberal, popular, competent, cooperative, and decisive strongman than to find one.<sup>16</sup> Washington might have lucked out, but maybe not. More attractive in principle would have been to promote a freer and more open political transition. Still, the results would not necessarily have been different, since Rhee was not without popular support. Anyway, American military officers were ill-equipped to govern a distant land with an ancient history about which they knew very little, especially given the "confusion, controversy, factional rivalry, personal opportunism, and out-and-out hatred" confronting them.<sup>17</sup> And Matray warned against the tendency to "overestimate the power of the United States to determine events in Korea."<sup>18</sup>

However, with slightly enhanced ruthlessness, American officials might have defenestrated Rhee when his failings clearly undermined American policy. In fact, U.S. officials discussed not returning him to power after American forces pushed the North Korean forces northward.<sup>19</sup> The Eisenhower administration was equally serious about staging a coup against him ("Operation Everready") if he refused to accept an armistice.<sup>20</sup> Much conflict might have been avoided had the U.S. acted against Rhee even earlier.

All of these alternatives had their own problems, but they probably would not have turned out worse than accepting Rhee. Tolerating an incipient dictator who could not be trusted with his own nation's defense had tragic consequences for the people of South Korea and America.

### **Decision 3: Defending the Republic of Korea**

Setting up a new nation in a bad neighborhood is one thing. Defending it is another. Unfortunately, the Truman administration did the former but not the latter.

The evolution of administration security policy on the peninsula further reflected the same lack of foresight as when Washington proposed to share in occupation duties. Perhaps the U.S. government could be forgiven for initially hoping for speedy reunification achieved with Soviet cooperation. But that prospect quickly disappeared. Instead of promoting stability, "The ultimate result of great power rivalry, therefore, was to institutionalize the civil war in two contending states, both committed to the cause of unification."<sup>21</sup> The two countries settled into a near war, with frequent cross-border raids and military clashes. Yet despite a North Korean military build-up, the Pentagon resisted proposals to increase military assistance to Rhee. In particular, Washington refused to equip the ROK's military with aircraft (either bombers or fighters), tanks, and other heavy equipment, and to limit ammunition stocks. Some in Washington simply overestimated the ROK's military readiness. More important was the certitude that Rhee would, if able, make good on his repeated threat to retake the "lost territories" in the North. Observed James Matray: "Once Rhee had sufficient military power, there could be little doubt that he would attempt forcible reunification."<sup>22</sup>

Still, the Truman administration went even further than this rationale would suggest. Noted Richard Thornton, who believes the administration deliberately set up Rhee: "of course, anti-tank guns, anti-tank mines, anti-aircraft guns, and coastal patrol craft could not provide the basis for an invasion of the North. They could only be employed in defense. Yet they were pointedly not provided."<sup>23</sup> Thus, when war came the North possessed a decided military edge. One need not believe Thornton's conspiratorial theory to agree that the administration did little "to deter an attack. Indeed, from its actions and inaction in 1950, Washington invited one."<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, the U.S. withdrew its last military forces from the South in July 1949. Although Pentagon defense planners recognized that there was a risk of the North invading the South, they did not intend to unilaterally commit U.S. troops in the event of war.<sup>25</sup> Washington both doubted Korea's importance and the Rhee regime's longevity; the administration preferred not to waste resources on the South's military. Indeed, the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that the South was "of little strategic value to the United States" and that any commitment "of military force in Korea would be ill-advised."<sup>26</sup>



Acheson's famous speech communicated this message to the communist states, whatever his intent. Even after the U.S. entered the war, the Joint Chiefs advocated minimizing America's commitment should a broader war with the Soviet Union occur, since "it would be militarily unsound for the United States to commit large forces against the USSR in an area of slight strategic importance."<sup>27</sup>

James Matray put the best face possible on Truman administration policy, contending that "Truman did not intend to shirk American responsibilities in Korea. His strategy envisioned instead the emergence of an economically strong and politically stable South Korea that would permit the United States to withdraw safely and without surrendering the entire peninsula to Soviet domination."<sup>28</sup> But even if true, this strategy manifestly failed. And the administration had no alternative policy to prevent precisely that domination. It made no sense to invest resources to create the Republic of Korea without adopting policies to ensure its survival, whether by building up its own military, offering a U.S. security guarantee, maintaining an American garrison, or some combination of the three.

For good reason Kim Il-sung believed military victory was likely and Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong believed Washington was unlikely to intervene. Of course, Kim might have chosen to attack anyway. However, what we know of the decision-making process leading to the war—unfortunately, North Korea's archives remain closed—suggests that had Stalin and Mao thought the U.S. likely to intervene Kim would not have attacked, and especially with Soviet and Chinese backing, at least in June 1950.<sup>29</sup> So obvious was the deleterious impact of U.S. policy that some American officials actually predicted that the North would invade and when.<sup>30</sup>

Once Washington committed itself to occupation duty in Korea, it should have committed itself to ensure the security of the state that it established. If the Truman administration was not willing to do the latter, it should not have entered Korea in the first place.

#### **Decision 4: Going to War to Stop North Korea**

The North Korean invasion and South Korean collapse left Truman administration policy in Asia in tatters. However, Washington faced more political embarrassment than the nation faced a security threat.

The invasion did not directly threaten the U.S. As noted earlier, the Department of Defense and military commanders including Gen.

MacArthur viewed the Korean peninsula as of only modest strategic value.

The North's invasion was unlikely to significantly impact other, more important, regional concerns. China already had been "lost" and no amount of wishing in Washington was going to restore Chiang Kai-shek to power. The Nationalists were only tenuously clinging to Taiwan even before Kim's invasion and the administration had effectively written them off.

Japan was far more critical than Korea and remained safe under American occupation—the San Francisco peace treaty would not be signed for more than a year. No "domino" effect seemed likely elsewhere in East Asia: the Philippines and allied colonial possessions all were distant from the conflict. The intangible morale of America's allies might have fallen, but the U.S. had not promised to defend the ROK, so Washington's credibility was not directly at stake. Thus, its failure to defend Korea was no predictor of America's willingness to act if other nations were threatened.

However, an administration under attack for losing China and otherwise failing to confront Communism could not easily ignore the crisis on the Korean peninsula. While no popular groundswell for war was likely, the "loss" of South Korea would become one more Republican talking point against President Truman and the Democrats.

Moreover, the administration committed a basic error. As historian Glenn Paige explained, "the President and his advisers had no doubt whatever that the North Korean invasion had been inspired and controlled by the Soviet Union."<sup>31</sup> Beatrice Heuser similarly said: "Suspensions about Soviet intentions were among the reasons preventing the Western Powers from seeing the Korean War as a civil war. They saw it as a war ordered by Stalin, and fitting in with the expansionist masterplan of the Kremlin."<sup>32</sup>

Thus, Washington policymakers worried about an expanded war if they failed to act. John Foster Dulles said that "to sit by while Korea is overrun by unprovoked armed attack would start a disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war."<sup>33</sup> Truman was explicit about his reasoning: "Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier.... If this was allowed to go unchallenged, it would mean a third world war."<sup>34</sup>

However, the invasion was not a Soviet project. The attack was Kim Il-sung's idea and he initiated the war, though he acted with the support of the USSR and China. There is no evidence that Joseph Stalin, a cautious predator wary of confrontation with the U.S., was prepared to inaugurate global war as a follow-up to a successful invasion of Korea. It was one thing to encourage an ally to grab a weak American client state seemingly abandoned by Washington. It was quite another thing to contemplate war over lands that the U.S. had recently fought to protect from German or Japanese tyranny. Omar Bradley, who joined the consensus at the time and said it was necessary to "draw the line somewhere," recanted this view later in life, admitting that many officials incorrectly presumed the Soviets were behind every adverse Communist move internationally.<sup>35</sup>

With no overriding security interest at stake, Washington might have tried alternatives short of full-scale participation in the war. Some top military officials proposed relying on air and naval support. At least one analyst believes that provision of previously denied anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons could have halted the North Korean attack.<sup>36</sup> Other ideas included bringing the matter to the United Nations, a U.S. blockade of the DPRK, UN-approved economic sanctions, and the rescue and retrofit of South Korean military units in Japan. Unfortunately, none of these steps seem likely to have halted Kim's offensive once begun or otherwise prevented the North's conquest of the peninsula.

The strongest argument for acting was perception. Richard Whelan explained: "American intervention in Korea was primarily *symbolic* in intention; it was meant to demonstrate to the world America's willingness and ability aid friends and allies in their struggle to resist Soviet domination. It was a matter of credibility and prestige."<sup>37</sup> Yet the U.S., having withdrawn, left no combat troops, and provided no security guarantee, had limited its commitment to Korea. As noted earlier, failing to act there had little implications for Europe or Japan. Credibility is at greatest risk when directly engaged. The Truman administration had consciously limited its potential loss in this regard. Perhaps Washington's willingness to expend so much effort on a peripheral (or "slight," according to the JCS) strategic interest without any treaty commitment acted to deter Soviet adventurism elsewhere.<sup>38</sup> But evidence of a Soviet intent to attack other Western nations remains in short supply.

Thus, having earlier decided that the Republic of Korea was not worth arming or garrisoning, the Truman administration should have concluded that the ROK was not worth defending in June 1950. On a strategic basis, the Korean War was a costly mistake. Having refused to defend the South when it would have been easy to do so, it made no sense to act when it was difficult to do so.

The best case for American intervention was Washington's own culpability in setting the circumstances that led to conflict. This provided a moral rather than security rationale for entering the war. The Truman administration arguably had a responsibility to retrieve the situation—for the South Korean people if not their government. Whether the American people were obliged to pay the resulting price is less obvious.

### **Decision 5: Liberating the North**

Had the war concluded on October 1, 1950, when the allied forces regained the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the most long-lasting consequences of the conflict—including the extraordinary destruction wrought throughout the peninsula, horrific casualties among all combatants, enduring enmity between Beijing and Washington, and deepening of the Cold War across the globe—would have been mitigated to varying degrees. The war would have lasted a little more than three months rather than a little more than three years.

The conflict likely would have effectively ended at this point had the allies merely restored the status quo ante. Kim Il-sung would have lacked the capacity to renew the war, especially against South Korean forces augmented by America. The Chinese likely would not have intervened.

In short, the march north was a disastrous mistake. Today a critic calls the vision of liberation after North Korea's military collapse quixotic.<sup>39</sup> Still, there was a reason for the apparent blindness of Washington policymakers. The opportunity to liberate the North appeared to be a God-send. The many benefits of reunifying the peninsula and "rolling back" communism were obvious.

Still, there were voices in Washington warning of the dangers of Chinese and Soviet intervention.<sup>40</sup> Even the National Security Council recognized the risk of triggering a world war if the U.S. attempted to forcibly reunify the peninsula: "If the present United Nations action in Korea can accomplish this political objective without substantial risk of

general war with the Soviet Union or Communist China, it would be in our interest to advocate the pressing of the United Nations action to this conclusion.”<sup>41</sup>

And China provided a number of signs that it would not countenance American forces on its border. For instance, Premier Chou En-lai summoned Indian Ambassador Kavalam Panikkar (without diplomatic relations, Washington and Beijing had no means of direct contact) to a famous midnight interview to issue a warning. American intelligence officers also were aware of an ongoing Chinese military build-up in nearby Manchuria.

Unfortunately, the Truman administration treated the PRC threats as a bluff. Washington publicly offered Beijing assurances of its good will and officials had trouble imagining that the Chinese would see any threat against the PRC where none existed. The American military’s actions spoke louder than any words, however.<sup>42</sup> U.S. officials assumed that China’s leaders would be focused on domestic problems, but an American military triumph on the PRC’s border could create domestic political problems for Beijing.<sup>43</sup>

The allies could have stopped at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Still, Washington had three legitimate objectives beyond simply restoring the ROK: punish the aggressor, reduce the aggressor’s opportunity for future mischief, and liberate as many people as possible from the aggressor’s control.

Thus, the administration should have considered two alternatives. The first would have been to only use South Korean troops north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, along with a promise to withdraw American forces from the peninsula once peace was restored. Zhou’s warning to Panikkar indicated that the PRC would not intervene if only the ROK military moved north.<sup>44</sup> Whether the PRC viewed this position as a final resolution or the opening bid in a future negotiation, such a strategy offered the possibility of a peaceful settlement. Second, the allied forces could have halted on a line drawn across the peninsula’s narrow neck north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, perhaps between Pyongyang and Wonsan. Max Hastings argues, “The Chinese undoubtedly went into Korea with the limited objective of driving back the Americans to a respectable distance from the Yalu.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, it appears that Mao Zedong and Peng Dehuai, the commander of the “Chinese People’s Volunteers,” originally “devised a plan to hold a line north of Pyongyang, rather than trying to push the Americans completely out of North Korea,” to be followed by

negotiations over a final border settlement.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, after the Soviet Union withdrew its offer of direct air support, the Chinese leadership discussed establishing defensive lines north of Pyongyang and Wonsan, which could be used as a base for future offensive operations.<sup>47</sup>

A voluntary halt north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel would have mimicked these plans, addressing, though perhaps not fully satisfying, the PRC's major security concerns. Relying on only South Korean soldiers in the North could have further eased Chinese concerns.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, Washington could have added assurances that the U.S. had no intention of opening hostilities against the new regime in Beijing and reaffirmed the administration's earlier decision not to intervene on Chiang Kai-shek's behalf. The latter assurance would have been particularly important. The Truman administration had for a time pursued a strategy designed to woo the PRC away from the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup> When President Truman reversed himself to insert the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait, he acted "without paying much attention to how the Chinese Communists might react."<sup>50</sup> Yet the Chinese leadership tied together American policies throughout East Asia as evidence of "aggressive" and "predatory" behavior.<sup>51</sup>

Beijing might still have viewed the allied position as unduly threatening. Mao in particular might have been reluctant to back down. Historian Shu Guang Zhang writes: "it now seems arguable that Beijing's decision to intervene, though catalyzed by the breach of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, was no less significantly shaped by Mao's optimistic willingness to confront the U.S. in Korea."<sup>52</sup> Obviously, the PRC was an independent actor that could have maintained the same course irrespective of Washington's actions.

Nevertheless, had the allies halted short of the Yalu, Mao and his colleagues, many of whom were uneasy about confronting America, would have been forced to rethink their decision. In fact, Stalin's retraction of his offer of Soviet air support caused Mao to suspend troop movements until the Politburo could reconsider its decision.<sup>53</sup> An allied military halt would have been an even greater change in circumstances.

Nor did Beijing rush events on the battlefield. Pyongyang fell to U.S. forces on October 19<sup>th</sup>, but China did not actually launch its first, limited offensive until late in the month against allied forces which had advanced much closer to the Chinese border. Even then, the PRC backed away, seemingly giving the allies time to retreat.

Certainly the march to the Yalu was a mistake. But there were alternatives to stopping at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The latter strategy would not have been without risk, but the benefits of even partial liberation of North Korea would have been worth the risk.

### **Decision 6: Fighting a Limited War Over Korea**

In Korea the U.S. consciously fought a limited war. Most obvious was the refusal to take the conflict into China even after the PRC became America's primary adversary. Washington also eschewed use of atomic weapons, in contrast to World War II. Moreover, as the battle line across the peninsula stabilized in mid-1950 Washington changed its objective from victory to a draw.

Limiting both objectives and means was controversial at the time. General MacArthur was perhaps the most important advocate of taking the war to China, which ultimately led to his firing. But MacArthur's views were not uncommon. The Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated a naval blockade, lifting restrictions on Nationalist Chinese operations against the mainland, and covert assistance to guerrillas on the mainland. Other proposals included attacking air bases, mining rivers, and destroying ports and railways, all in China.<sup>54</sup> General Mark Clark even proposed a massive escalation, including the use of Chinese Nationalist troops and atomic bombs, to break the deadlocked negotiations over an armistice. Many Truman administration officials contemplated a more limited escalation for the same purpose. So did incoming President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

This was what Washington policymakers believed was necessary to force a draw. Presumably more would have been necessary to "win." MacArthur advocated a sustained nuclear assault on Manchuria and creation of a "belt of radioactive cobalt" to interdict reinforcement and resupply of Chinese forces in Korea.<sup>55</sup> A blockade of the Chinese coast and strategic bombing of Chinese targets, including with atomic weapons, would have been other options.

The armistice disappointed almost everyone. After three years of horrific conflict, significant casualties, and enormous destruction, the parties all ended up roughly where they began. The Korean War settled nothing.

Should the U.S. have tried for more? Washington almost certainly would have lost its allies on the way to a fiercer and bigger war. When President Truman suggested his willingness to use nuclear weapons,

tremors shook Europe.<sup>56</sup> British Prime Minister Clement Atlee hurried to Washington “principally to dissuade any use of the atomic bomb in Korea without ‘formal agreement’ with the U.K., to discourage other measures leading to general war with Red China, and to urge that Washington accept a negotiated cease-fire in Korea even if Peking’s price included a seat in the UN and withdrawal of UN forces from Korea, Formosa, and Indochina.”<sup>57</sup>

The U.S. also would have risked a clash with the Soviet Union, which had signed an alliance with China. Moscow so far had proved reluctant to formally enter the war. For a time Stalin rejected Kim’s proposed invasion out of fear of a confrontation with America.<sup>58</sup> He refused to send troops when asked by Kim Il-sung.<sup>59</sup> The USSR also would not openly enter the conflict alongside Beijing.<sup>60</sup> U.S. officials considered the possibility of Soviet entry into the war, but generally dismissed the likelihood, though their assessment varied some over time.<sup>61</sup>

However, Moscow’s caution would have been increasingly tested the more America escalated. When the newly-inaugurated Eisenhower administration considered using nuclear weapons and attempting to destroy the Chinese air force, even the Joint Chiefs “thought it necessary to stress that expansion might involve the United States in a larger, longer, and more costly war with the PRC and could lead to an Asian war with the Soviet Union or, worse still, spark the outbreak of World War III.”<sup>62</sup>

Although it is impossible to know what Stalin would have done in response to a wide array of possible U.S. attacks on China, he could have increased military aid and covert military support. Moreover, Moscow would have had a powerful incentive to accelerate its own armament program. Perhaps Stalin would have applied increased military pressure in Europe—another move on Berlin, an assault on Yugoslavia, increased destabilization of Greece. Moscow might have considered transferring atomic technology or weapons to the PRC. At some point, perhaps if Stalin perceived the survival of Chinese Communism at stake, the USSR might have more directly confronted America.

Assume Washington was able to hold together its alliance and the Soviet Union refrained from turning the Korean War into a global conflagration. Would China then have yielded?

In the abstract, China would not seem to profit enough from preserving North Korea to risk all-out war with nuclear-armed America.



However, Beijing entered the war for what were defensive reasons in its view. The more extensive the force deployed by Washington, the more dangerous China likely would perceive the threat from America. After all, why would Washington go to such trouble to merely unify the Korean nation?

Thus, Beijing likely would have responded to escalation with escalation. The Chinese Communist Party demonstrated a high “pain threshold” during its years of struggle with the Nationalists. High Chinese casualties after Beijing’s initial military successes against allied forces did not dissuade Beijing from reinforcing its forces and launching new offensives. At some point the PRC leadership presumably would have yielded. But no one, especially in Washington, had any idea at what point.

In any case, the U.S. had too little to gain even if it won to warrant this course. The war was never going to be over large geopolitical issues. As mentioned earlier, the Joint Chiefs considered withdrawal from Korea after the Chinese invasion. They were not certain that the stakes were worth confronting China, given real world resource constraints.

Had Washington achieved “victory” in the sense of ending the war on the Yalu, the war would have only marginally advanced American interests. (The outcome obviously mattered much more to the Korean people.) Eliminating North Korea would have done little to reduce America’s Cold War defensive burden in East Asia, since the U.S. almost certainly would have needed to maintain a troop presence to protect a united ROK from China. The latter could have been expected to host a government-in-exile claiming to speak for the Korean people, underwrite a continuing campaign of subversion against a still unpopular Rhee government, and prepare to reverse the war’s outcome if possible.

Moreover, victory in Korea would not have changed the perceived threat to America posed by the Soviet Union or PRC. To the contrary, escalating war to the Chinese homeland likely would have frightened both Communist powers, further militarizing the Cold War. The bond between two Communist behemoths probably would have been strengthened. A large-scale conflict with substantial U.S. bombing of the mainland would have made the 1970s rapprochement between Washington and Beijing and ongoing liberalization in the PRC far less likely.

### Decision 7: Fighting the War Only Over Korea

Although the struggle between President Truman and General MacArthur was formally over strategy in *the Korean War*, the subtext was a battle over whether the war should morph into *the Chinese War*. After all, Gen. MacArthur's proposal to "unleash" Chiang Kai-shek—which presumed levels of military competence and popular appeal that the Nationalist government did not exhibit—made little sense in the context of the Korean peninsula. The real issue was reclaiming the mainland from the Communists.

Overthrowing the PRC offered a much better argument for escalation than did eliminating Kim Il-sung's small if aggressive Korean state. The benefits of success would have been significant—liberating the world's most populous nation and reversing a dangerous advance of an assertive totalitarian ideology. However, making the war over China rather than Korea would substantially raise the stakes for both the PRC and Soviet Union. For the Chinese leadership, which would equate its survival with national survival, the means would become unlimited. The PRC was economically backward, but likely would have launched a total mobilization effort.

Moreover, Stalin certainly would have done much more to defend China had he perceived Washington's objective to be the overthrow of the PRC rather than of the DPRK. Indeed, the one consistent "but" articulated by American policymakers who concluded that Moscow would not risk war with the U.S. was that "it understood clearly that we had no intention of attempting to overthrow the Chinese Communist regime by force."<sup>63</sup> Take away that condition, and all bets would be off.

Even if the Soviets stayed out, America's chances of success looked dim. The incoming Eisenhower administration could rattle sabers—talking about using nuclear weapons and removing restrictions on nationalist Chinese military operations—in order to push Beijing to finalize an armistice that both sides appeared to desire.<sup>64</sup> To actually have initiated such actions and more in pursuit of victory would have been quite different.

Chiang's forces could do little even if backed by Washington; there was little reason to believe they would be dramatically more effective in 1950 than they had been the year before, when the Nationalists were ousted. But the U.S. did not have the military manpower necessary to conquer China; any attempt to do so would require a massive mobilization and would have left Europe vulnerable to possible Soviet

attack.

To escalate and fail would have disastrous consequences. And the cost in blood and money of just the attempt would have been far greater than in the actual conflict. Such a campaign would have dramatically intensified the Cold War. As alluring was the possibility of reversing the Communist revolution might have seemed, it almost certainly would have been the wrong war at the wrong time.

### **Decision 8: Fighting Over the Repatriation of Prisoners**

The entire Korean War was a tragedy. Begun by Kim Il-sung with the worst motives, it resulted in only mass death and destruction.

The most tragic fighting occurred between mid-1951 and mid-1953. The battle front had stabilized and it soon became evident that neither side was able or willing to deploy the resources necessary to achieve a decisive breakthrough. Everyone who died during the course of the armistice negotiations truly died in vain.

Many issues delayed a settlement. The most contentious undoubtedly was the repatriation of prisoners. Normally countries swap all-for-all. But the U.S. demanded that repatriation be voluntary. Wrote historian Clay Blair: “for propaganda and humanitarian reasons Washington introduced several unprecedented and complicated conditions for the exchange of prisoners.”<sup>65</sup> For the same propaganda reasons neither North Korea nor China could easily agree with anything short of full repatriation.

Assessing exactly when the armistice might otherwise have been arranged involves substantial conjecture, especially since evidence exists that the Chinese leadership as well as Stalin saw advantages in continuing the war and might not otherwise have been quick to settle.<sup>66</sup> Still, the controversy appears to have lengthened the war. Blair contended that the allied demands “ultimately prolonged the Korean War for another year and a half, during which time United States forces suffered 37,000 more battlefield casualties.”<sup>67</sup>

The issue was controversial even within the U.S. military and government at the time but President Truman was steadfast.<sup>68</sup> Blair put the question bluntly: “Should American (and UN) soldiers fight and die or suffer wounds and injuries in order to give their former enemies, many of them traitors, freedom of choice over repatriation?”<sup>69</sup>

The issue may be one of the most vexing of the war. The American government’s highest duty was to its own citizens, military personnel

included. There was no obligation for Washington to promote the principle of voluntary repatriation. Yet forced repatriation would make the allies complicit in repression. The U.S. and Great Britain already had turned over millions of Soviets, as well as a number of Russians, such as post-revolutionary émigrés, who were not Soviet citizens, to Moscow at the conclusion of World War II. Known as *Operation Keelhaul*, the result was mass execution and imprisonment.

In the end, the allies won the point in Korea, and roughly 48,000 prisoners, mostly North Koreans, refused to return home. Roughly 350 allied prisoners remained in the North. Along the way, the allies together incurred more casualties than the number of POWs who were freed. Moreover, by deadlocking negotiations this issue brought both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations close to massive escalation to force a military decision. In effect, then, Washington contemplated risking World War III to enforce its demand for choice in prisoner exchange.

The Truman administration's decision was difficult. It also was incorrect. The extension and potential expansion of the war was too high a cost to pay for making voluntary repatriation a requirement for agreement. It was worth proposing that prisoners be allowed to choose whether or not to return. However, the administration should have conceded the issue when it became clear that the question would unduly delay a settlement.

### **Decision 9: Providing a Post-War Security Guarantee**

America's military involvement on the peninsula persisted after the war ended. Without a peace treaty—or, more accurately, conditions that would guarantee the preservation of peace—the ROK remained acutely vulnerable to any resumption of hostilities.

As a cold peace descended on the peninsula, Washington negotiated a defense treaty with South Korea. Or as Youngnok Koo of the University of Michigan put it, Rhee "extracted" the agreement as compensation for the war's indecisive outcome.<sup>70</sup> The Mutual Defense Treaty, ratified in January 1954, did not explicitly guarantee U.S. military assistance to the ROK. However, the continued presence of U.S. soldiers in the ROK acted as a tripwire that would make American participation in combat automatic.

Again abandoning the South would have been inconceivable. The Eisenhower administration threatened to walk away if Rhee did not

accept the armistice. However, it was a giant bluff. A coup was a more likely option had Rhee remained a barrier to halting the war.<sup>71</sup>

Having suffered more than 150,000 casualties to prevent South Korea's defeat, Washington had no choice but to create a security structure to preserve the South's independence. The U.S. would not repeat its mistake of 1949, when it withdrew without adequately preparing the ROK. The resulting defense treaty and troop commitment still endure today.

The alliance made sense in 1953. However, the relationship should have been structured to discourage permanent South Korea dependency. The principal flaw in original U.S. occupation policy was failing to promote ROK self-sufficiency. America's post-war alliance policy repeated the same mistake in a different way. At regular intervals both American and South Korean officials talked about the ROK matching the North militarily, but what followed always were more promises rather than actions.<sup>72</sup> Even today the South faces quantitative deficiencies, though it enjoys a qualitative and technological edge. Yet by the 1980s and certainly the 1990s South Korea was more than able to defend itself against an adversary with a decrepit economy that faced international isolation and had lost military support from its two great war-time allies.<sup>73</sup> The United States should have steadily drawn down its troop levels as Seoul's ability to provide for its own defense improved.

As in 1949, Washington today is overstretched and over-budget.<sup>74</sup> It should not leave troops deployed where they are no longer needed.

### **Decision 10: Militarizing the Cold War through NSC 68**

At the end of World War II there was strong popular pressure to demobilize. The number of men in uniform fell from 12.4 million to roughly 1.5 million by June 1950 and conscription was allowed to expire for a time. Military budgets dropped rapidly. But the Cold War developed equally quickly. President Harry Truman's speech in March 1947, pledging American support for peoples resisting subjugation "by armed minorities or by outside pressure" often is seen as the onset of the Cold War. However, historian James L. Gormly suggested that "the Truman Doctrine speech is, more precisely, a part of the breakdown of the Grand Alliance" which began even as World War II was ending.<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, a highly militarized conflict was not inevitable. Key to changing U.S. policy was NSC-68, which was presented to the president in April 1950. The document set the path for a more confrontational

U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union, with Washington “strengthening its allies and warning its adversaries.”<sup>76</sup> However, absent a serious international threat there remained little domestic political support for a major military build-up. The Korean War provided that threat.

Of course, the conflict did not occur in an international vacuum. Explained William Stueck: “The North Korean attack came at a time of increasing alarm in Washington over recently international developments and growing pressure on the Truman administration to act decisively in Asia.”<sup>77</sup> However, these factors alone were not enough to intensify the Cold War to such a degree, particularly at that moment. Robert Jervis wrote:

American policy during the height of the cold war was distinguished by the following features: (1) a high degree of conflict with the USSR; (2) a significant perceived threat of war; (3) high defense budgets; (4) large armies in Europe; (5) the perception of a united Sino-Soviet bloc; (6) the belief that limited wars were a major danger; and, following from the latter two beliefs (7) anti-Communist commitments all over the globe. While the first and perhaps the second characteristics were present from 1946 to 1947, the other five came only after Korea.<sup>78</sup>

One of the most important aspects was budgetary. Concluded Fred Inglis: “From that moment, NSC 68 became the foundation of American foreign policy, and there were few limits to what budget the president could ask from Congress for the next thirty-odd years.”<sup>79</sup> Military outlays remained high even after the Cold War ended.

Also dramatic “was the militarization of NATO; the transforming of a paper organization built on a symbolic American commitment to a force capable of resisting Soviet attack.”<sup>80</sup> This obviously meant more U.S. troops and weapons. There also came more security commitments, like that to Korea. NATO expanded to Greece and Turkey; Washington created SEATO, CENTO, ANZUS, and the mutual defense treaty with Japan. America “would extend commitments to threatened areas, stake its reputation on meeting force with force, and thereby deter adventurism.”<sup>81</sup>

Another event conceivably could have sparked a similar transformation of U.S. policy, but none look likely to have had the same effect.<sup>82</sup> So effective was the Korean War in transforming American

foreign policy that Richard Thornton argued the administration provoked the war in order to implement its larger policy: “A protracted conflict with China would provide the lengthy political stimulus for the rearmament that would thrust the United States into a position of hegemony.”<sup>83</sup>

Advocates of NSC-68 were not without reason in fearing for the future. While Stalin’s predation always appeared cautious and opportunistic, there were no certainties, and it is impossible to know what he would have done had he not died in early 1953.<sup>84</sup>

Nevertheless, the implementation of NSC-68, both in degree and timing, appears to have been a significant error. Hindsight is wonderful, of course, but to claim, as did one U.S. official, that at that time America was “in a war worse than any we have ever experienced” was simply not true.<sup>85</sup> Despite defending the authors of NSC-68, even Beatrice Heuser argued that “the enormous re-armament programme which sprang from NSC 68 was probably excessive in any case” and that “NSC 68’s provisions for the increase of ‘roll-back’ operations” were negative.<sup>86</sup>

Moreover, Washington’s rapid and radical mobilization sparked a dangerous reaction that arguably lessened American security. John Lewis Gaddis contended that:

NSC 68 was, then, a deeply flawed document, in the sense that the measures it recommended undercut the goals it was trying to achieve. A military buildup might enhance American security if American interests remained stable, but NSC 68 expanded interests. Fragmentation of the communist world might be a desirable objective, but treating communists everywhere as equally dangerous was not the way to achieve it. A more moderate Soviet attitude towards the outside world was certainly to be welcomed, but a negotiating posture that required Soviet capitulation could hardly hasten it.<sup>87</sup>

Although the Cold War ended without a global conflict, this may have reflected luck as much as policy. Moreover, later major power conflicts in Vietnam and Afghanistan and proxy wars in numerous Third World states were costly in terms of life and money. The diversion of resources to the military was enormous; the persistent international tensions may have delayed liberalization and ultimately collapse of Communist states.

Had the Truman administration made different decisions—not gotten involved in the Korean peninsula, adequately provided for the defense of its weak client state, not joined the war once it erupted, or halted short of the Yalu—there would have been much less pressure to militarize the Cold War. Even while fighting in Korea the Truman administration could have moved more slowly elsewhere, carefully monitoring Soviet reactions. Of course, once Washington was involved in a shooting war with China backed by the USSR, the relationship among former World War II allies was bound to significantly worsen around the globe. Still, the military competition could have been more constrained.

### Conclusion

Few wars easily survive the harsh glare of history. President Truman and his aides had to make many difficult decisions under difficult circumstances. Nevertheless, administration mistakes did much to trigger the Korea War, expand the conflict to China, and militarize the Cold War around the world. The conflict's malign impact is still being felt on the Korean peninsula and beyond.

### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., John Merrill, *Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), p. 136. Depending on where they are taken, the various competing explanations often complement and sometimes compete with one another. Merrill, pp. 19-54. One of the most innovative is that from Richard C. Thornton, who contends that Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong were in a race, with the former promoting war on the Korean peninsula to preempt the latter from invading Taiwan. Richard C. Thornton, *Odd Man Out: Truman, Stalin, Mao, and the Origins of the Korean War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000), pp. 101-18.

<sup>2</sup> D. Clayton James with Anne Sharp Wells, *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Free Press, 1993), p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Weathersby, "North Korean Foreign Relations: Historical Roots of Present Patterns," the ICAS Lectures, Institute for Corean-American Studies, February 22, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> The saga of the stillborn trusteeship is described in James Irving Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), pp. 52-124.



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<sup>5</sup> Richard Whelan, *Drawing the Line: The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1990), p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Whelan, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Callum MacDonald, *Korea: The War Before Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1986), pp. 13, 30, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> The actual impact of his words occasioned much comment, though it remains unclear to what extent they affected policy in any of the Communist states. See, e.g., Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 358, 691; Goulden, pp. 30-31; Chen Jian, "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and China's Entry into the Korean War," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War international History Project, Working Paper No. 1, June 1992, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> Matray, p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life and the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> James with Wells, p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> So incomprehensible was U.S. policy that one is tempted to give credence to the contention of Richard C. Thornton, a professor at George Washington University, that the administration "proceeded to treat the Rhee government in a manner designed to leave South Korea vulnerable to invasion." Thornton, pp. 147-48.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, U.S. officials brought in other Korean exiles and found them even harder to work with. See, e.g., Cumings, pp. 192-93.

<sup>17</sup> Whelan, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Matray, p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt, *On to the Yalu* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), p. 179.

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- <sup>20</sup> Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), p. 974.
- <sup>21</sup> MacDonald, p. 15.
- <sup>22</sup> Matray, p. 233.
- <sup>23</sup> Thornton, p. 149.
- <sup>24</sup> Thornton, p. 149.
- <sup>25</sup> Memorandum, Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 23, 1949, JCS 1483/74.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in Kim Chull Baum, "U.S. Policy on the Eve of the Korean War: Abandonment or Safeguard?", in *Korea and the Cold War: Division, Destruction, and Disarmament*, ed. Kim Chull Baum and James Matray (Claremont, Ca.: Regina Books, 1993), p. 90.
- <sup>27</sup> National Security Council, "A Report to the National Security Council by the Secretary of Defense on U.S. Courses of Action in the Event Soviet Forces Enter Korean Hostilities, NSC 76, July 21, 1950, pp. 1-2.
- <sup>28</sup> Matray, p. 151.
- <sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Whelan, p. 52.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 90.
- <sup>31</sup> Glenn Paige, *The Korean Decision: June 24-30, 1950* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 132. Paige's book provides a detailed study of the decision to intervene.
- <sup>32</sup> Beatrice Heuser, "NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat: A New Perspective on Western Threat Perception and Policy Making," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1991), p. 27.
- <sup>33</sup> John Toland, *In Mortal Combat: Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), p. 34.
- <sup>34</sup> Toland, p. 37.
- <sup>35</sup> Whelan, p. 140; Schaller, p. 186.
- <sup>36</sup> Thornton, p. 178.
- <sup>37</sup> Whelan, p. 52.
- <sup>38</sup> For an argument that the war in Korea may have helped deter a Soviet-sponsored attacks on Yugoslavia or Greece, see Heuser, pp. 37-38.
- <sup>39</sup> James, p. 179.

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<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950-1963* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 73-74.

<sup>41</sup> National Security Council, "A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea, NSC 81, September 1, 1950, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (New York: Norton, 1965), pp. 120-21. See also Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1980), p. 583.

<sup>43</sup> Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 160.

<sup>44</sup> William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 99.

<sup>45</sup> Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 341.

<sup>46</sup> Schaller, p. 202.

<sup>47</sup> Chen Jian, Working Paper, p. 33.

<sup>48</sup> The NSC surmised: "While the risk of Soviet or Chinese communist intervention might not be lessened if only the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.) forces conducted the operation north of the parallel, the risk of general hostilities as a result of such intervention would be reduced." NSC 81, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Thornton, pp. 51-77; Whelan, p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> Jervis, p. 582.

<sup>51</sup> Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), p. 56; Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 159, 181.

<sup>52</sup> Zhang, p. 85.

<sup>53</sup> Chen Jian, Working Paper, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> Foot, pp. 141, 154.

<sup>55</sup> Schaller, p. 231.

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- <sup>56</sup> Burton I. Kaufman, *The Korean War: Challenges in Crisis, Credibility, and Command* (New York: Knopf), p. 1986, p. 111.
- <sup>57</sup> Blair, p. 533.
- <sup>58</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Litai, p. 139; Weathersby, p. 4.
- <sup>59</sup> Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, pp. 197-98; Weathersby, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>60</sup> Goncharov, Lewis, and Litai, p. 189.
- <sup>61</sup> See, e.g., Foot, pp. 124, 163, 165, 168-69, 195-96, 228.
- <sup>62</sup> Foot, pp. 225-26.
- <sup>63</sup> Bombing close to sensitive Soviet territory also was considered to be risky. Foot, pp. 198, 224.
- <sup>64</sup> Blair, p. 971.
- <sup>65</sup> Blair, p. 962.
- <sup>66</sup> Stalin's malign role long has been known. See, e.g., Natalia Bajanova, "Assessing the Conclusion and Outcome of the Korean War," paper presented at Korea Society conference, "The Korean War: An Assessment of the Historical Record," July 24 & 25, 1995. But Beijing appeared to agree, at least in 1952. Weathersby, p. 9. Notably, the Chinese leadership appeared to move quickly to reach an agreement after Stalin's death. Weathersby, p. 10.
- <sup>67</sup> Blair, p. 962.
- <sup>68</sup> Blair, p. 963.
- <sup>69</sup> Blair, p. 964.
- <sup>70</sup> Youngnok Koo, "The First Hundred Years and Beyond," in Youngnok Koo and Dae-Sook Suh, ed.'s, *Korea and the United States: A Century of Cooperation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), p. 359.
- <sup>71</sup> Blair, p. 974.
- <sup>72</sup> Doug Bandow, *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1996), pp. 71-73.
- <sup>73</sup> Bandow, *Tripwire*; Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004).
- <sup>74</sup> Doug Bandow, "Bankrupt Empire," National Interest online, April 19, 2010, [www.nationalinterest.org](http://www.nationalinterest.org).

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<sup>75</sup> James L. Gormly, *The Collapse of the Grand Alliance: 1945-1948* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), p. ix.

<sup>76</sup> Thornton, p. 133.

<sup>77</sup> Stueck, p. 41.

<sup>78</sup> Jervis, p. 564.

<sup>79</sup> Inglis, p. 76.

<sup>80</sup> Jervis, p. 580.

<sup>81</sup> Jervis, p. 581.

<sup>82</sup> Jervis, pp. 586-88.

<sup>83</sup> Thornton, p. 353.

<sup>84</sup> Heuser, p. 39.

<sup>85</sup> Heuser, p. 23.

<sup>86</sup> Heuser, p. 40.

<sup>87</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 106.

